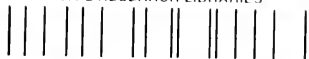


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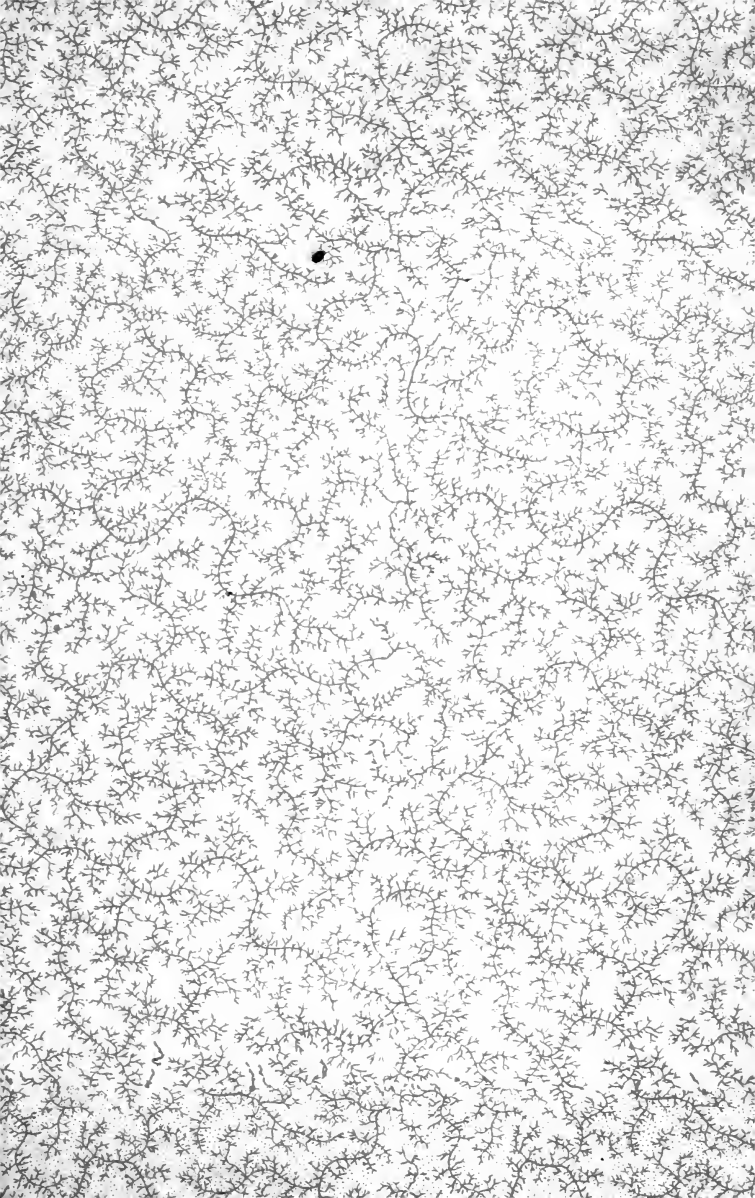


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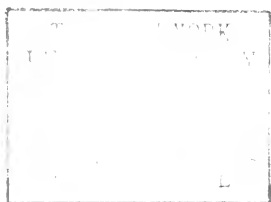


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Gwendoline;

OR,

HALCOTS AND HALCOMBES.

BY AGNES GIBERNE,

AUTHOR OF "THROUGH THE LINN," ETC.

REVISED BY THE COMMITTEE OF PUBLICATION.

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GWENDOLINE;
OR,
HALCOTS AND HALCOMBES.

CHAPTER I.

LONDON FOG.

“YOU won’t go into the city to-day, of course, Stuart?”

The voice betrayed anxiety. It was breakfast time, but gaslights shone overhead, glittering on chased silver and on broad blue borders of delicate china. Beyond the panes of the two windows only a dense yellow haze was visible.

Mr. Selwyn looked up from a deluge of morning correspondence, following his wife’s glance. “It will lessen,” he said tranquilly.

“Just this once,” she pleaded. “Such a day! Could you not be content to spend one day at home?”

“How about appointments, my love?”

"I dare say you have none of any importance."

"Gwendoline Halcombe, at twelve."

"The pretty girl that we met in the Academy with her father? But that need not take you out. You don't seriously suppose any lady would keep an appointment in this fog."

The lawyer's gray eyes laughed pleasantly beneath their broad brows. He was not lawyer-like, in aspect, according to conventional notions, being strong and upright in build, with ruddy coloring and a particularly straightforward expression.

"I don't for a moment suppose so of any lady," he said. "I suppose it to be not improbable in the case of Miss Halcombe."

"I do not like young women to be too independent,—very young and pretty ones especially."

"Perhaps Miss Halcombe does not like it either. Independence becomes a matter of necessity in certain instances,—with the eldest of ten, for example."

"Is she that?"

“Ten is the number, I believe, ranging from nineteen to three.”

"What made her fix on to-day?"

"She wrote and asked if she might have a few words with me. I named the day and the hour."

"Why not telegraph to put her off?"

"That is far from being my only engagement. And I could not reach her. She will be at her painting in the Academy or Kensington, I don't know which."

"Painting! yes, you promised to take me some day to see her drawings. She is clever, is she not?"

The lawyer was becoming absorbed in another letter. His wife surveyed the window afresh, trying to glean encouragement thence. Failing to do so, the conclusion at which she arrived was uttered aloud, with a sigh of despair:

"It is perfectly awful."

"Eh?" said Mr. Selwyn.

"The fog! It is awful, Stuart."

"It is rather thick, but I have seen worse," mildly admitted Mr. Selwyn.

"If this is only 'rather,' I can't know what 'very' thick may be. You will never get back from the city alive."

"That will scarcely be the fate of every city man. I hope I shall be among the survivors."

"O Stuart, don't joke about it. Suppose something really did happen."

She had been married only nine months, and was as yet unaccustomed to the vicissitudes of the London atmosphere, after twenty-six years in the clear air of a country village. There

was something country-like still about her soft plumpness and rosy cheeks. She was rather a pretty little woman, over twenty years her husband's junior. Mr. Selwyn had been married once before for a brief space, and had spent a long widowerhood before finding a second wife to his mind. He was still in the prime of life, a lawyer in good practice, a man of considerable private means, and a general favorite, greatly esteemed by all who knew him, for his unswerving rectitude and for his exceeding kindliness of heart. He had one son, Mortimer by name, four or five and twenty in age.

"Never expect evils, Isobel. I am an old hand at fogs. But, as you say, no need to jest. I have a note from Miss Withers. Lady Halcot desires an interview."

"Halcot! Isn't she the old lady at Riversmouth, who gives you so much trouble?"

"I should not like that description to reach Lady Halcot."

"Not very likely. I don't know any one belonging to her. And Miss Withers is the lady companion, is she not? I remember. What do they want you to do?"

"I shall have to run down to Riversmouth to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Lady Halcot expects me to-day. Impossible, unfortunately."

"I am sure I would rather have you go into the country than into the city. There would be some likelihood of your leaving this horrible fog behind you."

"Yes, but I am tied to city work, to-day—no help for it. I think the fog shows signs of lifting."

"I wish I could see them," sighed his wife.

Mr. Selwyn went to his office as usual, only not so quickly as usual, for traffic was under serious difficulties, and the promised "lifting" of the fog took place but slowly. If other people kept to their appointments that day, however, Gwendoline Halcombe unexpectedly failed in hers.

Riversmouth was a sea-side place within tolerably easy distance of London, but it was by no means a seaside place, of the fashionable description. No railway station existed within four miles of the village—called flatteringly by some of its inhabitants a "town." No trim parade was laid down above or below the beetling low cliffs, which overhung the shingly beach, parted by only one sharp and narrow cut, through which trickled a tiny brooklet beside a rough pathway. Houses stood irregularly above, tier above tier, and two or three of the oldest buildings jutted almost over the edges of the cliffs.

Lady Halcot, the aged owner of the land in

and about Riversmouth, strenuously resisted every attempt at improvement or "innovation:" her one aim being to keep the place precisely in the same condition as she had known it sixty or seventy years earlier. The traditions of her family sternly prescribed "selectness," forbade admission of strangers, discouraged popularity, abhorred excursionists, and fought against social and religious changes of any kind or description. The old lady strove to carry out these traditions to the letter, and where she failed she lamented sorely.

That the place had so far increased as to possess two churches in lieu of one was a distress to her, and no one yet ventured to suggest in her presence the growing need for a third. She was regularly to be seen each Sunday, once if not twice, in the cushioned square pew of the parish church, where her ancestors had sat from time immemorial, but she had little to say to the Riversmouth clergy. The Rev. Charles Jay of the chapel-of-ease she had always disliked and ignored, simply from the fact that he belonged to a building the very existence of which she deprecated. The Rev. William Rossiter of the parish church, appointed to it by herself some twelve years earlier, had long been honored by her friendship and confidence. But three or four years ago a change had crept quietly over the

dream of peaceful parish slumbrousness, wherein the old lady delighted. Nobody knew exactly when or how it began. Only, somehow, Mr. Rossiter's placid moral essays grew into earnest expositions of Bible truth and vigorous appeals to his congregation to repent and be saved; also an active young curate came upon the scene, and Bible-classes were started, and cottage-lectures sprang into being—"Such things as were never even mentioned in my grandfather's days," Lady Halcot said in her disgust.

She remonstrated with Mr. Rossiter, but was met by a gentle resistance, on which she had not calculated. Mr. Rossiter had reached that point where the question becomes one of obedience to God rather than man. He would have spoken of a change in himself and in his views of work to be done for his Lord and Master, but she would not listen. If he did not choose to conform to her will she had nothing more to say to the matter—or to him. Mr. Rossiter was permitted only to bow and withdraw, and from that day he was admitted no more into the Leys. He went quietly on with what he believed to be his duty, scattering the word of life to the right and left, as he found opportunity, and meeting with much happy encouragement at times. But he saw no more of Lady Halcot, except in her pew and her pony-carriage. She vouchsafed him

occasionally an icy bow in passing; and she studiously placed every possible obstacle in the way of his labors. It never occurred to her that she was thus actually hindering work for God. The idea might have startled her, had she looked it in the face.

No London fog had found its way to Riversmouth next day, when Mr. Selwyn stood upon the eastern cliff, enjoying the strong sea-breeze. He unbuttoned his great coat, threw back his shoulders, and drank in large gulps of salt air, with a Londoner's appreciation of the same. Waves below were tumbling in, one upon another, with reckless haste, as the breeze helped onward the rapid spring-tide. There was not a gale, but the wind possessed sufficient force to whisk off the white wave crests, scattering them in small spray around, and to wail weirdly among roofs and chimney-pots. Rock-boulders lay upon the beach, where at intervals in the past they had fallen from the cliffs above, and amongst them the waves splashed roughly, swirling round, and drawing back, and leaving trails of white foam to die upon the stones.

A zig-zag flight of narrow steps, guarded by a stout hand-rail, led down the face of the cliff. Mr. Selwyn, standing at the top, had decided not to descend, when his eye was caught by a figure below. "If it is not—" he ejaculated.

sometimes points in two directions equally. Mother would tell me to pray to be shown the right way."

He did not exactly smile. His was not a cynical face by any means; but his expression for a moment was curious. Gwendoline's brown eyes had a sudden flash in them.

"And mother is right," she said. "For what we want to do is God's will—of course; and how are we to know what his will is, unless he shows us? So it *is* the exercise of common sense to ask him!" Gwendoline's bright eyes met Mr. Selwyn's steadily again, seeking to discover whether he agreed.

Mr. Selwyn contrived to banish from his face any manner of decisive expression. He did not wish to enter into a discussion upon this question. "So you settled to come," he said.

"Yes, they all said I ought. And besides, I had another reason—" she stopped, and colored brilliantly.

"Your journey prevented your coming to me yesterday, I suppose?"

"No, we did not start till the afternoon. I was near your office at twelve; but I changed my mind."

Mr. Selwyn showed surprise.

"I changed my mind," she repeated, looking down. "It was only something I wanted to

consult you about, and just at last I decided not to ask you. I thought you would discourage me, and I wanted to be free."

"You would rather not tell me what the 'thing' is?"

"I'll think about it. Not now, please," she said, sedately. Then, with a sudden change of manner, turning towards the sea, "Oh, that wave!"

She fairly wrung her hands with delight, as a massive billow rolled in upon its predecessor, rising in a broad green wall of water, and curling over to fall with booming crash and hissing swirl. Mr. Selwyn uttered a word of warning and stepped back. Gwendoline did not move, and the foam rushed in a flood round her feet and ankles. She said only, "There!"

CHAPTER II.

LADY HALCOT.

“WHAT are you going to do now?”

“I have only this pair of boots with me. It does not matter. Nobody ever takes cold with salt water.”

“You have shoes, I suppose?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t stay in-doors to-day.”

“Where does your friend live?”

“Honora. She does not live here at all. We are visiting her uncle and aunt—dear kind little old people, Mr. Selwyn, but not the very least bit in any august circle of ‘society.’ It is a mite of a house, some way from the beach. Honor is coming to me presently. I could not bear to lose a moment of the sea.”

“But you will go back now, and look to your wet boots,” he said, with polite persuasiveness.

She gave an impatient gasp, then said, “If I *must*”—and turned to spring lightly up the steps.

At the top they paused. “I wish I could go

farther with you," Mr. Selwyn said. "But I am due at the Leys."

"I wondered what you were here for. Oh, what a delicious little carriage!"

The carriage, low and open, drawn by two exuberant ponies, went past rapidly. An old lady sat beside the drab-liveried young driver—small and shrunken in figure, muffled well in ermine wraps, with thin snowy hair, bushy gray eyebrows, and two bright black eyes, which scanned Mr. Selwyn and his companion sharply. Mr. Selwyn lifted his hat with an air of profound politeness, and the old lady's head made a slight movement in acknowledgment of the same.

"Who is that?" asked the girl.

"Lady Halcot."

"It is? Mother wondered if I should see her. She looks—severe."

"She is severe."

"She has a splendid Roman nose—if only she were a taller woman to match it."

"When you are a famous artist you may offer to take her likeness."

"Ah—when!" she said, sighing deeply. "The poor old lady will scarcely live so long. But I really am taking a likeness now—of Mrs. Hobbs, our grocer's wife. She hasn't exactly classical features, and she wears an astonishing

cap. I am to have a guinea for it, however." Gwendoline looked up laughingly.

"Most of us have to begin on the lowest round of the ladder," said Mr. Selwyn, liking her courage.

"I think I am glad to have seen Lady Halcot," she said abruptly. "I understand better now."

Mr. Selwyn looked for more.

"About the state of things. You know I am a believer in physiognomy, though not always in my own reading of it. But Lady Halcot has a face easy to make out. If she made up her mind to any one course of action, she would not soon swerve from it."

"Your knowledge of the past gives you fair reason for supposing so."

"I was not sure till I saw her face. But I am now. I am afraid I should meet with a cold reception, if I ventured to call on her."

"I fear so, indeed. I could not recommend the step."

"Good-bye," said Gwendoline.

He shook hands and passed on. Gwendoline stood still, sighing deeply once more.

"It will not do," she said. "No, it will not do. I have been indulging day-dreams. I am glad I did not mention my idea to any one. Things looked different from a distance, but now

I am here I see it will not do! I just *couldn't* take any such step. Mother says one's way always becomes clear, if one prays and waits. I suppose this is the becoming clear of my way. It isn't what I wished and dreamed. But to go to the Leys uninvited!—oh, no. What was I about, to think of such a thing? And yet—oh, mother, if I could but bring you ease somehow—anyhow! What could I not bear for your sake? if only it were God's will."

Half an hour later Lady Halcot, having reached home, was seated in her favorite arm-chair, a large chair for so small a woman. The greater portion of her time was spent in this plainly furnished morning-room or boudoir, more correctly a study, since it contained two handsome writing-tables besides a davenport, and was almost lined with books. The study proper, usually called "the library," was seldom used by her.

Divested of fur wraps, Lady Halcot might be found slightly deformed as well as small. One shoulder was a little raised, and the shape of her hands was singular, the knuckles being exaggerated in size. She sat upright, making no use of her chair-back. The davenport, close beside her, was covered with correspondence; and one of the said bony hands wielded a pen rapidly, filling page after page with bold handwriting.

Opposite the old lady, at the largest writing-table, sat a light-haired young man, of depressed look and generally timid aspect.

"You may address these for me," Lady Halcot said suddenly, tossing some note-sheets towards him.

The young man's depressed look deepened into positive unhappiness. He took the letters slowly, examining one after another in a hesitating manner. Lady Halcot surveyed him with her bright cynical eyes, and finally broke into a—"Well?"

"I—I—am not quite sure—that is to say—I—"

"Ring the bell," said Lady Halcot impatiently.

The young man obeyed, with a nervous start of response, and a man-servant appeared.

"Call Miss Withers."

The servant disappeared, and presently came back with a deprecating air. Miss Withers was out, and had not yet returned.

"Where is she gone?"

The man-servant was not aware. Lady Halcot looked at the young man for information, and with a second start he immediately turned over a small ink-stand, deluging two of the notes. He stared at the results of his own awkwardness in blank despair.

"That will do for to-day," Lady Halcot re-

marked frigidly. "Give those papers to me, Bryce. Take care, here is a sheet of blotting-paper. I shall not require any further assistance this morning, Mr. Withers. You had better remove the cloth, Bryce, immediately, or the table will be ruined. Dear me, it is one o'clock. Mr. Selwyn will be here soon."

"Mr. Selwyn has just arrived, your ladyship," Bryce said, as he gathered up the ink-bedewed table-cloth.

"Bring him here to me, at once. You may go, Mr. Withers," for the young man seemed at a loss what to do. "Cannot you understand? I wish to see Mr. Selwyn alone."

Mr. Withers in alarm bowed, and precipitately retreated. Outside the room his face assumed a boyish expression of relief, and he sped at a headlong pace along the broad corridor. Passing below the draped curtains, which divided it from the entrance hall, he nearly ran down a slim and quiet lady, over thirty, perhaps even over thirty-five, in age, dressed with unexceptionable neatness, having calm light-blue eyes, and smooth washed-out fair hair.

"Really, Conrad!" she said.

"I beg your pardon, aunt—didn't mean to hurt you, I'm sure I'm very sorry," said the dismayed Conrad, staggering back from the collision.

"Where are you going?"

"I turned over an ink-stand, and Lady Halcot ordered me off."

"You never get through a day without a blunder of some sort," the lady said in hushed tones, moving with him towards the ponderous front door. "Lady Halcot will grow tired of it soon, and dismiss you altogether."

Mr. Withers looked as if a worse event might happen, in his own opinion, than such dismissal.

"Yes, that is all very well," she said. "But think what the disappointment would be to me,—and to your sisters. Remember, Conrad, you have had difficulty enough before this, in finding any work for which you were fitted."

"I don't really think I am fitted for this," said disconsolate Conrad.

"Yes, you are, quite sufficiently, if you would determine to do your best. You are not brilliant, but you have sense enough for all that Lady Halcot requires," she said, lowering her voice to almost a whisper. "What you have to do is to make yourself necessary to her, Conrad. You understand. Make yourself *necessary*, in her every-day life. You should be incessantly on the watch to forestall her slightest wish—yet you must take care never to seem obtrusive. It is far more a matter of tact and attention than of cleverness. If you let this opportu-

nity slip, you will never in your life have such another."

Conrad Withers' expression was not responsive, but he said meekly, "I'll try, aunt, I'm sure I mean to do my best." Whereupon Miss Withers released him.

CHAPTER III.

GLADIOLUS COTTAGE.

MR. SELWYN went through a certain stage of perplexity in Lady Halcot's presence, as to the immediate cause of his summons to Riversmouth. Usually her plan was to plunge headlong into business, allowing scant space for polite greetings beforehand. Now, for once, she seemed disinclined to speak plainly, and showed an unwonted disposition to "beat about the bush." Some minor questions were brought up, relative to the management of her property, but these were questions which might have been quite as easily discussed by post. Mr. Selwyn was perfectly well aware that they had not yet come to the point. He began to doubt whether after all he would get away by the early afternoon train, which he had set down in his mental plan.

"You have Miss Withers still with you," he remarked, when a pause occurred in the conversation.

"Yes, I have," responded Lady Halcot.

"With me, and likely to remain. She is an invaluable person. I can rely entirely upon her memory, and my own plays me false occasionally. I suppose I must expect as much at my age."

"You are to be congratulated, Lady Halcot, if it never played you false until now."

"I do not say that, but my memory has been remarkably good. Time was when I could read a stanza once through, which I had never seen before—not a short one either—and repeat it afterwards, without a mistake. I cannot do so now."

"And Miss Withers' memory serves to fill up gaps."

"Precisely so." She looked at him keenly. "You do not like Miss Withers."

The lawyer made a slight deprecating bow. "Pardon me! Miss Withers and I can boast but the barest possible acquaintance with each other. You appear to find her well suited to her post."

"She is exactly that—quiet and ladylike, always helpful and never in the way. I wish Mr. Withers were her equal."

"Your secretary?"

"He calls himself so. I allow him to hinder me in my work, for two or three hours every day, by way of giving satisfaction to Miss

Withers. She foretells that the hindering is soon to develop into helping. I have my doubts, but I am willing to give him a fair trial."

"Miss Withers is a near relative of Mr. Withers?" the lawyer said inquiringly.

"His aunt. He has two sisters, I believe, but no parents living. Miss Withers seems to have acted a motherly part to the three. Very praiseworthy, of course. Mr. Selwyn—"

Now it was coming! The lawyer looked expectant.

"Who was that charming girl upon the cliff yesterday—speaking to you? I was not aware that you had friends in the place."

"She is a charming girl—a London acquaintance, down here for two days. We met accidentally on the shore," Mr. Selwyn said slowly, his mind taking a rapid survey of the situation.

"I was struck with her appearance. A clever girl, I should imagine."

"Yes—in many respects, no doubt, and she certainly has marked artistic talent."

Lady Halcot's withered face brightened with a look of interest. "Talent," she repeated. "Not genius?"

"Perhaps I should rather have said genius—but really I do not know. I imagine that she has power to originate, though at present she

chiefly copies. It is uphill work, and she is the eldest of a large family."

"What is her father?"

"A clerk, Lady Halcot."

"In your office?"

"No—in a house of business. I have only seen him once. He is much occupied, and has very poor health. I do not know what would become of them all, if he broke down."

"Then they are poor. What is their name?"

"They are poor unquestionably. If this young lady succeeds by-and-by—"

"As an artist!" Lady Halcot shook her head. "How old is the girl?"

"Not twenty yet, I believe."

"She may get butter to her bread by picture-making, ten years hence, and possibly a competence twenty years later. That is all you can hope from even first-rate talent. Possibly a competence."

"Some do better."

"Some have genius. Has she it, or not? That is the question. You do not know; no, but I could soon judge. How long does she remain?"

"Only till the day after to-morrow."

"And of course she has no pictures here. I might be able to give her a helping hand, if there is genuine power. I never lend my aid to passing off mediocrity for genius. We must

consider what to do. Meanwhile, if you think it would be acceptable, I have no objection to sending a five-pound note to the parents."

Mr. Selwyn decided on his line of action. "I think, your ladyship, that it would unquestionably be acceptable, if sent direct from yourself, with a few kind words accompanying."

"Very well. The name and address, if you please."

She passed a slip of paper, and a pen. Mr. Selwyn wrote slowly and handed it back.

"James Halcombe, Esq."

She read so far aloud, stopped, and lifted her black eyes to Mr. Selwyn's face. Inwardly, he was just a little nervous. Gwendoline Halcombe interested him, and he was anxious to do his best for her; but naturally he did not wish to offend his wealthy client.

"James Halcombe," repeated Lady Halcot.

"Gwendoline Halcombe's mother, and James Halcombe's wife, *was* Eleanor Halcot."

The old lady's start was irrepressible, and her hand shook, but she said in a stern and unfaltering voice, "Then Eleanor Halcombe is dead."

"No—she is living. I meant 'was' only in the sense of before her marriage."

Lady Halcot folded the paper, and slipped it into a drawer, with hands that trembled still.

She was evidently vexed with herself for the display of weakness.

"You may send the five-pound note for me, if you choose," she said. "But it must be a strictly anonymous gift. I was not aware that you knew these people, Mr. Selwyn."

"Mr. Halcombe called on me once to consult me upon a difficulty, and his daughter has been two or three times since. Also I have met her in the Royal Academy, and elsewhere. One is naturally drawn to a struggling young artist."

Lady Halcot offered no reply. The luncheon-bell rang, and she rose to lead the way out of the room. The express object of Mr. Selwyn's journey had not yet been broached.

Gwendoline had truly described *Gladiolus Cottage* as a "mite of a house." It had one tiny parlor in front, with a single window, and a tinier kitchen on the same level behind; and two bedrooms above; and two sloping-roofed garrets at the top, one of which was the servant's domicile, and the other a receptacle for lumber. Of the two best bedrooms, one was tenanted by Mr. and Mrs. Widrington; the other was reserved for guests.

Mr. and Mrs. Widrington had no children of their own. One little baby had come and had vanished, in days long gone by, leaving tender memories behind it. Mr. Widrington, after fifty

or sixty years of steady work, had made his little competence, and had retired into an easy life, his chief trouble thenceforward being to know what to do with himself. He had many a longing for his old city-home and old interests. The sleepy quiet of Riversmouth palled upon him, and the rumble of carts and omnibuses would have been as music to his city-bred ears. But the step once taken could not easily be reversed, even so far as a home was concerned, and could not be reversed at all so far as business was concerned.

Thus Mr. Widrington found himself in for the somewhat tiresome leisure of a healthy and objectless old age—literally and actually objectless. His leading aim through long years past had been to make enough money for present needs, and to secure a sufficiency for comfort in declining years. He had made enough ; he had secured the sufficiency ; and declining years were coming upon him gently. What next ?

That was the question. Mr. Widrington had no "next." He had attained to his life-goal, and no loftier goal lay beyond. He was conscious of this, and he was dissatisfied in the consciousness. Hitherto a pleasant prospect had always lain ahead, in the shape of this same "comfortable old age," spurring him on to ex-

ertion. He had lost the spur now, and he missed the stimulus. The happiest old age cannot last forever, and Mr. Widrington began to dislike the thought of being an "old man," to object to the term being used in respect of himself.

For there lay now no pleasant prospect ahead. Mr. Widrington was not exactly troubled by fears as to his future. He counted himself to have done his duty on the whole, towards himself; towards his family; towards his neighbors; towards God? Mr. Widrington did not care to look very closely into that last question, but he hoped things were all right, and he hoped to get to heaven somehow, a vague and shadowy heaven, not particularly attractive to his imagination; only of course desirable.

Thus Mr. Widrington's hopes as well as his heaven were vague. He had also a vague knowledge of his Bible, which he seldom read, and a vague belief that Christ had died for men generally. But in all this he found no real comfort for the future, nor joy for the present. How should he? So Mr. Widrington, though to superficial observers seemingly a chatty and contented old man, was in fact by no means a happy one.

The change of life to Mrs. Widrington was less severe. A stout little old lady, good-

humored and kind, often ailing as to health, but always even in spirits, she could be well satisfied with the mild excitements incidental to "pottering" about the house all the morning, taking a turn out of doors in the afternoon, knitting and sleeping through the evening. The comforts of husband and household had been her aim during nearly half a century, and that aim was before her still. She had not even a wish for anything beyond this tame level of her existence.

A visit from Honora Dewhurst was a great event in their lives, and the interest of the event was doubled by the presence of Honora's friend, Gwendoline Halcombe.

"She is a pretty girl, and there's no denying it," Mr. Widrington said emphatically, as he and his wife awaited the return of the two walkers to early tea; a primitive tea of bread and butter and cake, shrimps and watercresses. "She's a downright pretty girl, and uncommon nice too. Now there's Honor, as good and nice a girl as can be, and clever too there's no denying, for her pictures are amazing good. But nobody ever called Honor pretty. The goodness is all of an inside sort, and not of an outside—though it shows through and no mistake. But this young thing has got both, and there's no doubt she's greatly favored. For a pleasant outside is by no means a thing to be despised."

"I wonder if they don't mean to come back soon. The tea will spoil," rather irrelevantly observed Mrs. Widrington, who, dressed in her best black silk, was seated in her easy chair, with the invariable knitting in her plump round hands, and the invariable content in her plump round face. Mrs. Widrington was better born than her husband, and forty-five years earlier her family had counted the marriage a serious downward-step for her. Perhaps for a while she had felt it so herself. People grow used to new levels, however, and Mrs. Widrington was most happily accustomed to the platform upon which she stood. She looked up to her husband with dutiful wife-like submission; and if in particular instances she usually counted her own judgment superior to his, this was not at all because of any original difference in social position, but simply because she was a woman, and he was, as she would have said, "only a man."

"There they come—just in time," Mr. Widrington said, gently striking his hands together, as he stood at the window. "Just you look, wife—now don't you call that a pretty picture?"

Mrs. Widrington moved to his side obediently. "But it's a dreadful mess," she said.

The two girls were approaching at a quick pace, laden with spoils from the sea-shore. Honora Dewhurst, a strongly-built and upright

person, four or five years Gwendoline's senior, walked steadily as well as swiftly, looking little to right or left. But Gwendoline, dressed still in her severe gray suit, seemed to be rippling over with frolicsome enjoyment, and the sound of her clear low laugh came through the open window, and was matched by the half-dancing step. Honora's hands were full of stones and shells, and Gwendoline bore a big pile of sea-weeds. One long ribbon spray had been caught by the breeze and twisted round her head, and the brilliant cheeks and merry eyes looked out from an unwonted surrounding.

"She's better for the change already," Mr. Widrington said, and he opened the door.

"We are not fit for the drawing-room," exclaimed Gwendoline. "Our boots, Honora!"

"Now you are going to have some tea before ever you take one step up-stairs," said Mr. Widrington decisively, avoiding his wife's eyes lest he should read disapproval. "Just you throw all that rubbish down in the passage, and take off your cloaks."

Neither would consent to this manner of proceeding. Possibly they saw the disapproval in another quarter, of which he preferred to be ignorant. They vanished up-stairs, and speedily re-appeared, Gwendoline still in a glow of enjoy-

ment, Honora quiet and staid, with her plain strong face, and broad, thoughtful forehead.

"And you like the sea, my dear—eh?" Mr. Widrington said to Gwendoline.

"It is lovely—past words," she said. "If I could just live within sight and hearing of it, I think I should want nothing else in life."

"It's lively, there's no doubt," said Mr. Widrington. "But it isn't a cheerful sort of liveliness, by any manner of means. Now you'll think me odd, may be, but I'd a deal rather have a 'bus going past the door every five minutes, than I'd look on the finest sea that ever was, a deal rather."

Gwendoline refrained from remark.

"Riversmouth is a pretty little place, and it has got capabilities. Take some cresses? Yes, do, Miss Halcombe, and lay your butter on thick, and have a little jam a-top—don't you stint yourself. Yes, Riversmouth's a pretty place. But dear me, as long as that poor old lady is alive, the village will never grow to what it should be. Why, it might become a first-rate watering place of the fashionable sort in no time; just lay down a double line of rail, and put up a station, and have a good band and an excursion train or two in the week. Now that *would* be lively-like."

The two girls exchanged amused glances.

Honora Dewhurst knew of the relationship between Gwendoline and Lady Halcot, though the Widringtons did not.

"My dear, you needn't suppose anything of that sort is likely to be," Mrs. Widrington said. "There are ever so many things wanted in the town, and nobody dares name them to Lady Halcot. She has everything her own way, and not a man ventures to cross her will. She's regular queen here, and that's what it is."

"I am afraid some of her subjects are in a rebellious state of mind," said Honora. "But as for excursionists, the longer the place can escape that infliction the better. Here comes a visitor to disturb our meal."

"Mr. Selwyn," exclaimed Gwendoline.

"A friend of yours, Miss Halcombe?" asked Mr. Widrington.

"Yes, at least I know him. He is a friend really. He is down from London for a few hours—Lady Halcot's lawyer."

"My dear, you take an old man's advice, and you beware of lawyers," whispered Mr. Widrington very audibly, as the door-handle turned. "You take my advice, and be warned. There's always a six-and-eightpenny charge behind, sure as he takes a step in your behalf. And I may say it, if anybody may, for I know it to my—"

"Mr. Sellon," announced the bewildered maid-

servant, unused to so much company; and Mr. Selwyn entered, bowing and apologizing for the interruption, but might he have a few words with Miss Halcombe?

"To be sure, to be sure, as many as ever you please, sir," Mr. Widrington said eagerly, forgetting that he addressed a lawyer, and delighted with a fresh addition to the party. "But we are having our tea, and tea is a beverage that doesn't improve by keeping beyond a certain stage—not beyond a certain stage, sir—and these young ladies are hungry. So you just sit down, and take a cup of tea with us, and then we'll all clear out—eh, wifie? and leave you two in undisputed possession of the parlor."

Mr. Selwyn was slightly troubled. "The parlor" was evidently the only parlor, and he did not relish the idea of "turning out" its lawful inmates, though he would much have preferred a few words alone with Gwendoline. He sat down, however, and consented to take a cup of tea, declining substantials. "I dine at half-past seven," he said.

"You will hardly reach home in time for your dinner," suggested Gwendoline.

"Lady Halcot has persuaded me to remain over the night. I must leave by the 7.20 train in the morning."

"Mrs. Selwyn will be disappointed."

"I am afraid so. I have just sent her a telegram."

After a few minutes of general conversation, he turned again to Gwendoline, having decided to forego the private conversation. "I bring you an invitation, Miss Halcombe. Could you dine at Lady Halcot's this evening?"

"This evening!" The proposal seemed to take away her breath, and she turned pale.

"You would dislike it?" asked Mr. Selwyn, while Honora watched her gravely, and the old people were flustered at the magnitude of the proposal.

"No—oh, no—not at all. I am only surprised—" said Gwendoline, hardly able to speak. She sat quite still for two seconds, putting a strong restraint upon herself. "I will do exactly what you advise."

"I should recommend you to accept the invitation."

"To-night, at half-past seven."

"Punctually. Lady Halcot never waits. I think you should arrive ten minutes earlier."

"But I have no dress, except this."

Mr. Selwyn surveyed the dark tweed, neatly fitting, but almost devoid of ornament. Heavy trimmings were just then in vogue, and he was dimly conscious of something unusual.

"It must do of course," he said. "I suggested

that matters might be so, and Lady Halcot said you could come as you were."

Gwendoline sat lost in thought, and Mr. Selwyn rose, with the air of a man who has discharged himself of his office.

"Gwen, you had better open the front door for your friend," suggested Honora, guessing that the two might wish for a few more words, and she kept her uncle back, and shut the parlor-door.

"What does this mean?" asked Gwendoline, laying her hand on the slab, for she was positively trembling.

"It means simply that Lady Halcot desires to use this opportunity to form your acquaintance, Miss Halcombe."

"How does she know that I am here?"

"She saw you with me on the cliff this morning, and has since inquired your name."

"Strange," murmured Gwendoline. "I had a feeling when I came that I might perhaps see her—might perhaps say a word about—"

"A word about what, if I may ask?"

"My mother, and our circumstances. But I found that it would be impossible."

"I think you would be wise to count it impossible still," Mr. Selwyn said with gravity.

"But if an opening came—"

"I think you will, in any case, be wise to

avoid a single word which might leave an impression that you were seeking anything from her. Pardon my frankness," he said, as the color rushed again into her face. "I understand the state of affairs, and your true motive; but she would not."

"Thank you, I will take care," said Gwendoline, in a low voice. "I don't suppose I should have dared, after all. I am frightened of Lady Halcot."

"Don't be afraid to-night," he said, shaking hands. "She is interested in art, so you will have one subject in common. The carriage will bring you home at half-past nine. Lady Halcot keeps early hours, excusable at seventy-five. Good-bye."

"One word," said Gwendoline hurriedly. "Mr. Selwyn, do you suppose she means anything by this?—do you think it hopeful?—do you think we may count—for the future—"

"No," Mr. Selwyn said gravely. "I should be wrong to encourage hopes. What may come of it by-and-by no one can predict. At present I see no signs whatever of any softening towards your family, though she is disposed to feel some interest in yourself personally."

Gwendoline sighed. "Thank you—good-bye," she said, and she went back to the parlor.

"Honor, would it be very rude of me to run

away to the shore for half an hour? I don't want to be nervous and shy at dinner, and a look at the sea would give me back my balance." Gwendoline spoke beseechingly.

"You silly child," Honor said, smiling. "Yes, go, of course; only come back in good time. I must find some lace for your throat and wrists."

"You don't mean to say you are a friend of Lady Halcot's?" the old people chimed in, with accents of respect and amazement. "Why, you are quite a grand young person, my dear. Fancy you never saying a word about it."

Gwendoline laughed and vanished. "Her mother is Lady Halcot's cousin," Honora said quietly,—*"first cousin once removed, I believe. But it had better not be talked about in Riversmouth, please, uncle. Lady Halcot has had nothing to say to Gwen's mother since her marriage with Mr. Halcombe. I don't know who was most in the right or in the wrong. I only know that the less said about the matter the better pleased Lady Halcot will be—and probably Mrs. Halcombe also."*

"Trust a city man to keep a secret, Honor," said Mr. Widrington, nodding his head energetically.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROCKS.

HONORA came into the back bedroom ten minutes later, to find her friend attired in ulster and cap, gazing out of the window into a little back-yard.

"Dreaming, Gwen?" she asked.

"Yes," Gwendoline said, turning, with something like tears in her eyes. "Doesn't it sometimes feel to you as if life itself were more than half a dream?"

"No," Honora answered. "It seems to me altogether a tremendous reality."

"I know it is so. But sometimes I feel as if we were just leaves tossed to and fro on irresistible waves of circumstances—straws carried away on a strong current."

"Is Lady Halcot's invitation an irresistible wave?" asked Honora drily. "Why not say no at once?"

"Say no! I am only too eager to go, only too frightened lest I should make a mistake, and undo possible good for my mother and father

by some silly blunder. I can't guess what Lady Halcot wants or expects in me. If I get a self-conscious fit it will take away all ease; and if I talk too much she will count me forward; and if I talk too little she will find me dull—"

"And if she does, what then?"

"You don't know how much may depend upon this evening, Honor," said Gwendoline deprecatingly.

"You mean—"

Gwendoline's cheeks were burning again. "She ought to be kind to my mother. She ought to be willing to help. I would not say this to anybody except you, but mother was her adopted child for twenty years, and everybody thought she would be heiress to some of the property. I suppose she would have been, but for—but for—her marriage. Can it be right for Lady Halcot to cast her utterly off?"

"I suppose your mother took her choice, Gwen," said Honora gently and gravely.

"Yes, and it was not Lady Halcot's choice. But Lady Halcot allowed the engagement for a time, and then refused permission, and turned against my father. That was the wrong. It was tyranny, Honor. Could mother have forsaken him? Would you if in her place?"

Honora moved her head negatively. "Had Lady Halcot a reason?" she asked.

"She had not known before that my father's family were so poor, and she disliked some of his connections, I believe. It was nothing in himself. She ought to have inquired more fully before giving permission. Once given, she had no right to withdraw it,—for such a reason, at any rate."

"And she has held no intercourse with your mother since?"

"None; not a word or a message. She told mother that it would be so, that if the marriage took place she would never see her or speak to her again. Mother has not the faintest hope that she ever will. She says she never knew Lady Halcot change her purpose, or forgive an injury. But sometimes I have thought that if I could see Lady Halcot, I might persuade her to feel differently."

"She might be willing to help, even if she would not be on former terms," said Honora. "This looks like a possible step in that direction?"

"If it only were—if it might be," said Gwendoline, in a low voice. "I have such a craving sometimes just to see a possible way out of our difficulties. I feel like the man who was shut up in a room, and saw the walls drawing slowly nearer and nearer, day by day, till at last they crushed him to death between them. That story

always had a dreadful sort of fascination for me, and now I seem to see the walls closing and closing in. And we cannot escape ; and I can do nothing. Lady Halcot could help so easily ; it would be nothing to her. If I stood alone I could fight my way, and I would scorn to wish for one farthing of her money. But the pressure is terrible now, and it gets worse and worse. Mother is wearing out under it ; and father—Honor, I don't think he ever forgets that he is the cause of my mother being cut off from ease and luxury."

"And you are looking to yourself to bring about a reconciliation. Gwen, if I were you I would 'lift up mine eyes' higher."

Gwendoline was silent.

"The thing is not in your hands at all. It is in God's hands. The chasm may be bridged over any day, if he so will. And he may will to use you for the purpose. If not—"

"Ah!" sighed Gwendoline. "That 'if not' is my difficulty."

"Because you are bent upon having it your own way. But you cannot choose. It must be his doing ; and it must be done, inch by inch, as he wills. Better be content to have it thus, Gwennie dear—to rest quietly under the shadow of his hand, and to let him order things for you as he sees best. The walls will not close in and

crush you, if you are waiting on him to know the way out, but they may be allowed to come a little nearer. And the way of escape may be other than this."

Honora spoke in an earnest manner, and she laid a hand lovingly on Gwendoline's arm. It was a true and close friendship between the two, and Honora had not only a warm affection for this fair young creature, but a strong desire to shelter and protect her. Practically she could do little, however. She was a portionless orphan herself, and had to make her own way in the world.

"I ought to be able to trust," said Gwendoline. "We have always been helped so far—only when I look forward, and see things growing worse, I am afraid."

And Honora said softly—"Be not afraid; 'Let not your heart be troubled.' 'Trust in him at all times.'"

She added, after a pause—"I suppose we are so changeable ourselves by nature, that we really cannot imagine what absolute changelessness means. Gwen, your Master will not love and care for you one whit less to-morrow than he did yesterday. Only be willing to have things brought about as he chooses, and then follow carefully each indication of his guidance. The quieter you can be in heart, the less likely you

are to undo his will for you, by rash action. He knows what is best."

"It does seem as if it would be very much the best for Lady Halcot to forgive mother," said Gwendoline sadly. "Not that I like the word 'forgive.' I cannot think my mother was wrong."

"It might or might not be best. You and I don't know. Now you are going to have your little run, and you will come back the better for it. I wish I could go too, but I must not leave my uncle and aunt. By the by, I thought it best to speak plainly of your relationship to Lady Halcot, that I might warn them not to talk. I know you do not wish your affairs to be made the subject of Riversmouth gossip."

Gwendoline went off somewhat soberly, taking her course down the crooked principal street, through the cliff-opening, and over the beach.

The tide was at its full height, and indeed was already on the turn, and the breeze had somewhat increased in strength since the morning. Waves of considerable size rolled in, to break upon the shore in a succession of crashes, grinding the rounded pebbles. Three poor children, neatly dressed, a boy and two girls, were playing near the margin of the water, and two fishermen were loitering on the top of the



cliff; otherwise the shore appeared to be deserted. Gwendoline, fresh from city crowds, revelled in the sense of stillness, and delighted in the freedom of being thus practically alone.

Somewhat to the right of the cliff-opening, a long line of jagged rocks ran straight out into the sea. Gwendoline could not resist the temptation to climb along them. She did not find the task quite easy; for though at low-water they lay high and dry, they were now a very focus for splashing waves. Albeit a Londoner, she had a sure foot and steady brain, and she feared no slips. A dash of fine salt spray now and then was exhilarating; but she managed to keep her feet dry. At the further extremity of the chain a huge square boulder rose well out of the water, and here Gwendoline found for herself a comfortable seat. One or two passers-by, noting her from the cliffs, counted her rather an adventurous young woman, and were relieved to see her reach a place of safety. A false step half-way might have entailed serious consequences.

+ Gwendoline gave herself up to enjoyment—not exactly to thinking. Trains of clear thought, definitely carried on, are not often induced by the presence of nature in her fairest moods. The mind is at such a time rather receiving new impressions than working out old impres-

sions. Gwendoline was content to sit with clasped hands, thinking definitely about nothing, but drinking in with her lips the sweet fresh air, and drinking in with her eyes the varying blue tints of sea and sky, and drinking in with her ears the grand bass chords and softer treble accompaniments of the musical symphony played upon the pebbles by breaking waves and splashing waters; while vague musings crept unbidden through her mind. And the sense of restful trust in a Father's love, which she had not quite felt while Honora was speaking, seemed now to fill her heart. "For he made all this," murmured Gwendoline. "How easy for him to do just what he wills!"

Gwendoline's dreamy happiness was suddenly broken in upon by a sharp shriek. The little children on the beach, observing the movements of the young lady, had apparently been fired thereby to follow her example. Two of them were perched timidly on a rock at the beginning of the range, and showed small inclination to proceed further; but the third, a boy of about seven, had succeeded in reaching nearly half-way towards the end boulder. There his footings slipped or his presence of mind failed; for, with the scream which disturbed Gwendoline, he fell over, still grasping a point of rock with both hands.

The children wailed piteously, and Gwendoline sprang up. "Hold tight—hold on—I'm coming!" she cried, though doubtful whether her voice would reach him through the ceaseless splashing of the water. And even as she spoke, a large white-crested billow swept past, and the boy was torn away.

The accident had been seen from the top of the cliff, and men were hurrying down the steps, but Gwendoline knew there was no time to be lost. She stood perfectly still, considering what to do. Would the child be flung on the beach? For a moment she thought so, and then gave up the hope—if hope it were, since such a manner of landing must have been perilous to life and limb. The tide had by this time thoroughly turned, and the flow of the stream was seaward. As the wave passed on, to boom upon the shingles, the child was left behind, and the next instant, in the strong return-rush of water, he was borne farther back, to give a moment's sport to the following wave. Then he disappeared, to rise again near the boulder on which Gwendoline stood.

She had not been idle. In that brief space of time, while her eyes were strained in watching, she had flung off gloves, boots, and ulster, and had even dropped the skirt of her dress. She knew well that her only hope of keeping afloat,

if the attempt proved needful, would be to find herself as far as possible unencumbered. She could swim, having learned as a child, but she was entirely out of practice.

Would the little figure come within reach? Gwendoline gave a glance at the shore, and saw help still distant. Then she knelt down at the edge of the boulder; but that would not do. She flung herself flat, and hung over, with outstretched arms, striving to grasp him, but in vain. The waves, tossing him to and fro, seemed to mock at her efforts.

Down again into the green water the little form was helplessly sinking, and another broad billow was rolling up. Gwendoline felt that one hope only remained. She sprang to her feet, took one steady look, and leaped boldly in, striking the right spot, and seizing the child. The two went down together, and rose again, just as the big wave came up to catch them in its grasp, rolling them over, bearing them on, then leaving them in its rear.

Beaten and breathless, Gwendoline found her unpractised swimming powers of small avail. She could just keep herself afloat, and that was all. Even that could not be for long. Her best efforts were directed towards holding the mouth of the unconscious child above the waves; but water dashed over her own face.

blinding and choking her. Would help never come? Was this to be the end? Gwendoline thought of her mother, and dimly pictured the coming sorrow in her home. Then she remembered Lady Halcot, and even wondered what the old lady would think not to see her at dinner that evening. A vision of her last unfinished painting rose next, surrounded by a halo of girlish aspirations, perhaps never to be fulfilled. Again she found herself in the grasp of a powerful wave, and she knew her strength was gone. All around grew dark, and she felt that she and the child were sinking together. Yet in the deadly struggle for breath, there came to her sweetly the thought of One who had died on the cross for her. For Gwendoline knew and loved and trusted him, and he never fails his own.

Then something grasped and drew her out of the water; and some one took from her the little body to which she had so resolutely clung; and somebody else wrapped a cloak round her, and laid her at the bottom of the boat. Gwendoline was conscious of so much; and she even opened her eyes, and saw the weather-beaten faces of three fishermen, and also a grave face of a different stamp, bending over her. But after that she knew no more.

CHAPTER V.

AFTERWARDS.

“HONOR! is the child safe? O Honor!” Gwendoline started up in bed to a sitting posture, suddenly awake to the situation. She had been dimly conscious of her whereabouts for an hour past, conscious of very sick and weary sensations, and of moving figures around her, conscious also of an indefinite sense of fear from time to time, which made her cling to her friend's hand for protection. She had not, in her exhaustion, yet remembered what had occurred, or thought of asking about the child. But as she lay, half sleeping, with the pleasant protectiveness of Honora's cool hand clasping hers, clear recollection flashed all at once into her mind.

“Honor! what am I about? I had quite forgotten. Is the boy safe?”

“Keep quiet, Gwennie. You are under doctor's orders?” said Honora.

“What doctor? Why, I am not ill.”

"Mr. Fosbrook. You have been quite well the last hour, haven't you, Gwen?"

Gwendoline's mind travelled back. "I had forgotten. But I am all right now. How about the boy?"

"Mr. Fosbrook is with him. They are doing all they can," said Honora gently.

"Then he has not come to yet? I did my best, my very best," said Gwendoline sorrowfully. "I could not manage to hold the poor little head higher, and that last wave nearly did for both of us, I think. He was longer in the water than I. Is there no hope for him?"

"They do not give up hope. He may revive even now. If not, you will still know that you did your utmost! The men cannot say enough about your courage."

"Courage! That is nothing. I couldn't have stood by to see him drown. O Honor, if it has been useless, after all! I do wish I had tried a little harder."

"It was not possible. Don't take a morbid view of the matter, Gwen. You endangered your own life for his, and you could not have done more. The result is in God's hands."

"Poor little fellow! I wonder if he has a mother," Gwendoline said. Tears were dropping—a rare event with her, but she had been unnerved.

"Not a mother, I believe—only a sister who takes the place of a mother. I have been too busy with you, to learn particulars. I will go now, and see how he is, if you can promise to keep yourself quiet meantime."

She found efforts being still carried on, with unremitting vigor, as yet unsuccessfully. Mr. Fosbrook, a man of about forty, thin but well-knit, with sallow complexion and observant eyes, was alike directing operations, and taking an abundant share in them himself. His assistants were Mr. Widrington and the three sailors. Mrs. Widrington flustered hither and thither, procuring whatever was asked for, and making numberless suggestions which nobody heeded.

No time had been lost, for Mr. Fosbrook had happened to pass at the very moment of the accident, and he was himself the fourth man in the boat which put off to the rescue. But the small figure lay still to all appearance lifeless, and one and another was silently giving up hope. Honora stood unnoticed for a few seconds, near the door.

"I'm afeared it's all up with him, poor little chap," one of the men said. "I don't see as it's much use keeping on."

"Nor I," said Mr. Widrington, though he did not venture to stop rubbing. "I could tell from

the first it wouldn't be no good. Trust me to know! He's dead, wifie."

Mrs. Widrington put her handkerchief to her eyes. Mr. Fosbrook had stooped low, to place his ear over the region of the child's heart, and he stood up now with a sharp glance:

"Keep on. Don't slacken for an instant. Heat more flannels. It is *not* all up with him."

"Do you mean to say he is alive, doctor?" exclaimed Mrs. Widrington. "I shouldn't have thought it now. Poor dear little man." Mr. Fosbrook held again to the parted lips a tiny feather, brought to him by Honora. "See," he said, and there was indeed a faint stir visible.

"Why, so he is. Why, he isn't dead after all," exclaimed Mrs. Widrington. "Now I am glad. And that brave girl won't have risked drowning for nothing. Do you think we may say he is out of danger, doctor? I should like to send word to his sister, poor thing! And wouldn't you like me to get some beef-tea or something ready? I shouldn't wonder if the butcher's shop was open still, and Mary Jane could run for a pound of beef. He'll want something when he comes to. What do you think, Honor?"

Mrs. Widrington's excited little patter of talk seemed to be unheard by Mr. Fosbrook, but at the last word he turned himself about.

"Miss Halcombe doing well?" he asked, looking at Honora.

"She is quite herself, and very anxious about the child."

"Tell her there are signs of life. I hope we shall bring him round yet."

Honora went swiftly back to bear the message, and to spend another hour of suspense by Gwendoline's side. Gwendoline said little, only lay with eager eyes and tremulous lips, watching for tidings. Once or twice Mrs. Widrington fluttered in, carrying a gentle bustle with her, and assuring them that the little boy was getting on beautifully; a statement somewhat modified by a very audible whisper to Honora that "she didn't believe he would ever get over it, and she could see the doctor thought so to."

"And he's a clever man, is Mr. Fosbrook," she added aloud for the benefit of both,—“and a kind one too, though he is rather positive, and says a sharp word sometimes. But I'm sure he'd do anything for anybody, if he thought it right. I wonder he don't marry, for he's getting on in life, and he looks sickly, as if he wanted somebody to take care of him. Only think, Honor, the poor little boy hasn't any mother living, and his father was drowned at sea only last year,—wouldn't it have been strange if he had been drowned too?—and he would have

been if it wasn't for this brave girl. And there's a sister who takes care of the three children, and she is lame or something, and can't come to him. They say she is half-frantic, poor creature, she cares so much for this boy. He's a pretty little fellow, and I don't wonder. She must be a great deal older than these younger children. I wonder if she is only a half-sister. Now don't you make yourself unhappy, Miss Halcombe. I'll soon come back with more news."

But Mr. Fosbrook himself came next. His first move was to take Gwendoline's hand, and to shake it slightly.

"I congratulate you with all my heart on having saved a life," he said. "You have acted nobly."

Gwendoline's lips twitched, and she laughed in a nervous manner. "If I saved one, you helped to save two," she said.

"Aye, but not at the risk of my own. There is a slight difference, Miss Halcombe. You ought to have a Humane Society's Medal."

"Oh, no, no, thank you, I should not like any fuss," said Gwendoline hurriedly. "Nothing of that sort. But I am so glad! Poor little boy!"

"Is he quite out of danger?" asked Honora.

"Quite out of immediate danger. I cannot answer for after consequences."

"Honor," Gwendoline said softly a little later, when they were again alone, "I did not know that the purpose of my coming to Riversmouth was to be this. I expected something quite different."

"I suppose there is always a purpose in each step of our way," said Honora. "But God's purpose for us, and our own purpose for ourselves, are often not identical."

Gwendoline smiled assent, and seemed indisposed to carry on the conversation. Honora was glad to see her growing sleepy, but suddenly the sleepiness vanished, and she started up.

"Honor!"

"What is the matter?"

"Dinner at Lady Halcot's."

"Past eleven o'clock, Gwen, so I am afraid you can't go now."

"No, but seriously—was no excuse sent?"

"I am sorry to say I forgot all about it till an hour ago, and then it was too late. Besides, we really had no one to spare for a messenger earlier in the evening. We must despatch a note of explanation in the morning."

"I am not going to have any stir made," said Gwendoline resolutely. "My part of the affair was only just doing what I had to do, and what anybody else must have done in my place. I shall tell Lady Halcot that I had an accidental

wetting, and that I was very sorry not to go to her."

To this plan she adhered when morning came. Honora would have preferred a little more explicitness, but Gwendoline shrank from any appearance of boasting, and the note was despatched as she wrote it.

"I don't see as the thing matters either way," Mr. Widrington said to his niece. "News travels apace, and her ladyship is sure to hear the story before many hours are over—take my word for it."

Mr. Widrington was mistaken, so far as hours were concerned. Riversmouth news did not always reach Lady Halcot quickly. She fenced herself round with an enclosure of distant reserve, and few ventured to address her uninvited. Miss Withers heard the tale, of course, but Miss Withers did not repeat it, and for many days Lady Halcot believed that Gwendoline had made use of a trivial excuse to set aside her engagement. Such a belief implied displeasure on the part of Lady Halcot.

So also thought Mr. Selwyn. He returned by an early train, having not even seen the note which Gwendoline sent. He ascribed her non-appearance at dinner to a fit of girlish shyness or pride, and was alike vexed for her, and disappointed in her. He had counted Miss Hal-

combe to be rather superior to some feminine weaknesses.

Gwendoline's return home suffered only a day's postponement. She was somewhat shaken by her adventure, and the doctor counselled longer delay; but Honora could not remain, and Gwendoline would not consent to be left behind. She wrote home lightly of what had occurred, making little of the matter, and Honora by her request did not write at all.

CHAPTER VI.

GWEN'S HOME.

“**I** DON'T see that your Riversmouth trip has done much for you. If it was a pleasure you seem disposed to keep the enjoyment to yourself. Certainly you are not looking any the better for it.”

Ruth Halcombe, the speaker, was a blunt-mannered girl of seventeen, two years Gwendoline's junior, and in most respects a contrast to her elder sister. She was the useful and practical member of the household, and she prided herself on so being. Everybody in the house depended more or less on Ruth, yet none looked to her for sympathy. The boys went to Ruth for buttons and strings, but they carried all their little confidences to Gwendoline. There was a touch of hardness about Ruth which repelled people. She was affectionate below the surface, but she had no tenderness of manner; and she had not yet learned that usefulness may co-exist with beauty, and practicalness with

poetry. Gwendoline's restless pantings and aspirations were "sentiment" in Ruth's opinion.

Gwendoline had returned two or three hours earlier, to find herself suddenly plunged into the little whirl of home cares and the big swirl of London life.

The low roar of the latter struck her forcibly, after the quiet of Riversmouth. Londoner that she was, she never grew reconciled to perpetual sound; never attained to Ruth's happy condition of not hearing it; never ceased to feel oppressed by the great city and its unceasing tumult. She had such a thirst for stillness, and there was no stillness in her life. Out of doors and in doors Gwendoline could never be alone. To her finely strung nature solitude at times was more than a pleasure—it was a positive necessity: yet it was almost unattainable.

For Mr. Halcombe's income was very narrow, and his house was very small: and he had a wife, three daughters and seven sons, not to speak of a little maid-servant. Lady Halcot possessed her abundance of large rooms absolutely unused; but in this narrow dwelling, with its dingy outside, closed in by other houses to right and left and front and rear, there was not a corner where one might be secure against interruption. The elder boys were away all day, it is true; Victor in a counting-house; Jem,

Edmund and Fred at school ; but so was Gwendoline away most days at her painting, and when she came back they came back also. And the four youngest children, Artie, Willie, Bob and Nell, were always at home, Ruth being their teacher. So Gwendoline spent her time in a crowd.

The sense of overcrowding, and the pressure of home cares, had come upon her heavily that afternoon, as she found herself once more within the hall-door.

Gwendoline knew that some fresh trouble was brewing. She knew it before she had been five minutes at home. Not a word was said which might suggest the idea, but she read it in her mother's burdened look, and in the extra sharpness of Ruth's tones. She saw that they wanted to spare her a little while, and she heard her mother whisper softly,—“After tea, Ruthie.” There was no leisure as yet for any quiet conversation, and Gwendoline wisely asked no questions.

The narrow dining-room, with its worn-out chairs and its carpet of undistinguishable pattern, had a crowded appearance at meal times. The boys were healthy and merry enough, and chatter flowed on unceasingly, but life's cares seemed to have pressed hard upon the father and mother. Mr. Halcombe was a frail man, thin and stooping, with a shadowy likeness to

Gwendoline, almost lost in the anxious wrinkles which furrowed his brow and drew down his mouth-corners. Mrs. Halcombe was a little slight woman, exceedingly worn, yet with a kind of habitual cheeriness about her; never perhaps pretty even in the past, but always refined and sweet-mannered.

Mr. Halcombe and Victor had a mutton-chop each, in consideration of their day's work, and Mr. Halcombe ate his slowly, with an abstracted and mournful air, while Victor, a tall lad of sixteen, talked and laughed over his in untiring fashion. Ruth stood at the foot of the table, dispensing hunches of bread from the huge quartern loaf, and generally overlooking the other six boys, varying in ages from thirteen-years-old Jem to six-years-old Bob. The fairy-maiden, Nell, with her sweet eyes and sunny hair, sat in her three-years-old queenship close beside the tea-making mother, idolized by all.

"Gwen is tired," Mrs. Halcombe said, in response to Ruth. "It has been such a bustle ever since she came in. I wish we could have arranged differently."

"It has been the same as usual, I suppose," said Ruth. "Gwen must take home as she finds it—like other people."

"Ruth always has an appropriate moral ready for every occasion," said Victor. "I say, Gwen,

did you see anything of the old lady down there?"

Mrs. Halcombe had not asked the question, but Gwendoline saw the quick quiver of her eyelids. "I saw Lady Halcot pass in her pony-carriage, Victor."

"Did she speak to you?"

"No—she looked—"

"And that was all?"

Gwendoline had not meant to give particulars just then, but she could not answer in the affirmative.

"Lady Halcot saw me standing with Mr. Selwyn," she said. "He was down for the day, and we had met. She asked him afterwards who I was, and she sent an invitation through him, asking me to dinner. That was all. I meant to tell mother presently."

"A weighty 'all' too in my opinion," said Victor.

Mrs. Halcombe could not trust her voice. Mr. Halcombe looked up slowly, and asked—"What did it mean?"

"I am afraid it did not mean much, father. Mr. Selwyn told me not to count upon it—at least I think he meant that. Still it was very disappointing that I could not go. I sent a note next morning with an explanation; but I had no answer."

"You don't mean to say you allowed a paltry wetting in the sea to keep you away?" exclaimed Ruth, in a tone of strong disapproval.

"I could not help it, Ruth."

"I would have helped it, in your place. How you could, Gwen! When you knew how much might depend on your pleasing her! If your dress was not fit to go in, surely Miss Dewhurst would have lent you another. Why it seems like insanity—such a chance thrown away."

"I was very sorry, but it was impossible," repeated Gwendoline, flushing. "I was in bed all the evening."

"I would not have been there, I can tell you. And not even an excuse sent till next morning."

"No, it was forgotten. I didn't think about Lady Halcot, when I first came to myself—and the rest were all too busy with the child and me—"

Gwendoline's agitation under Ruth's reproaches betrayed her into saying so much, and then she paused. For a moment nobody seemed quite to take in the meaning of her words. Mr. Halcombe was the first to speak. He had been looking at her steadily, and he now put aside the little boy between him and Gwendoline, and moved to her side.

"Gwen, my child," he said in his depressed manner—"this has been more of an affair than

we know. You are quite unnerved and poorly. What is it, my dear?"

Gwendoline's face went down on his shoulder, and she clung to him, trembling.

"I saw that she was not herself, directly I came in," he said. "Ruth, you must not be so hard upon your sister. She would not have stayed away without good reason, I am sure. What is this about 'coming to yourself,' Gwen-nie? You don't mean that you were long enough in the water to lose consciousness."

"It couldn't be helped, father," said Gwendoline, lifting her face, and speaking hurriedly. "I did not want to make a fuss about the thing. It was only that a little boy fell in, and I had to go after him. There was nobody else near enough, and he would have been drowned. They got out a boat as quickly as possible, and came after us, just in time. I'm not a good enough swimmer for such waves, and I couldn't have held out any longer. I don't think I was long insensible, and it was more of a faint than anything else, but the poor little boy was very long coming round, and somehow nobody remembered Lady Halcot. I never thought about her at all, until eleven o'clock at night. The doctor would not let me get up next day until the afternoon—not that I was ill, only weak and shaky. He was very kind, and so was every-

body. But I really don't think I could have gone to see Lady Halcot even yesterday, and I had no answer at all to my note."

"My own brave girl," said Mr. Halcombe, and he folded her in his arms. "Thank God for it—and for his bringing you through. Yes, there are worse troubles than even money troubles; you spoke truth, Nellie." This was to his wife. "If our Gwen had been taken from us! Thank God for his mercy."

"Why, Gwen's a heroine," Victor exclaimed. "Well done, Gwen! We shall be proud of you."

"There's no need. It was just the natural thing to do," Gwendoline said shamefacedly.

"You never told us you had been in danger, Gwen," her mother said, with full eyes.

"I didn't see the need to write, mother—more than just a few words. And the danger was soon over. Honor said she meant to call soon and tell you everything. But I don't feel as if I could bear to talk about it yet," Gwendoline added, with whitening lips. "The very thought of the sea brings it all back, and turns me dizzy. Can't we speak of something else?"

"Gwen had much better go into the next room and be quiet," Ruth said, with a touch of apology for her own harshness. "Why don't you, Gwen? and mother too? You will like a chat, and I'll look after everything."

Gwendoline did not protest. She gave Ruth a grateful look, and went, followed by Mrs. Halcombe. It was not the household custom to dispute Ruth's mandate in lesser matters.

"Mother," Gwendoline said, making early use of her opportunity, "what has happened since I went away?"

"A good many things have happened, Gwen."

"Yes; but you can't take me in," Gwendoline said, looking steadfastly into Mrs. Halcombe's worn brave eyes. "Something particular has come, something that troubles you and father very much. I see it plainly. You can't take me in, mother darling. I must know, or I shall lie awake all night, wondering. It is easier to bear the truth than one's own fancies."

"Not always, Gwen," her mother said.

"Almost always, I think. It is a money trouble, mother."

Mrs. Halcombe tried to answer, and her voice failed. She could only press Gwendoline's hand.

"It must be something very bad indeed, for you to feel it so much," said Gwendoline gravely. "Tell me all, please. It is worse to wait."

"I wish I could make you wait," Mrs. Halcombe said, with a sob. "O Gwen, it is hard to bear up. God will surely provide for us. I have told myself so again and again, the last

day or two, and I have tried hard to be brave—to trust. But it is a sore trial of faith. I cannot see what we can do. I cannot see any way out.”

“What is it, mother? Don’t mind crying, but just tell me.”

That Mrs. Halcombe should fail in her cheery self-command, at least before others, was an event rare indeed, and Gwendoline was proportionately dismayed, yet proportionately anxious not to be herself betrayed into tears. She repeated earnestly, “Don’t be afraid, mother. We shall be helped—surely—somehow. Only please tell me what is wrong.”

“It is at the bank. They have told your father that they will not want him any more—any more—after midsummer.”

“Mother!”

Gwendoline could say no more. She was absolutely paralyzed. Her first sensation was as if she had been sinking again among ocean-waves, as if literal billows were rising around her and taking away her breath. But she only uttered the one faint word, and then sat, white and still, till power of breath and speech came back. Mrs. Halcombe’s face was hidden in her hands.

“Father dismissed! But what for? What has he done?” asked Gwendoline in distress.

"Nothing. It is not anything that he has done. They spoke kindly—said they would give the highest testimonials. But they are making some changes, and they want a younger man in his place. Your father says it is natural. He says he has grown old and slow lately, and has been forgetful and made mistakes. He is wearing out. But oh, Gwen, it is very, very terrible. What shall we do? How shall we live?"

"If I had seen Lady Halcot!" muttered Gwendoline's quivering lips. "If I had not tried to save the child's life! Mother, it couldn't be wrong to do that," she broke out passionately. "It couldn't be wrong. I would do it again, no matter what might come after. But why didn't I go to Lady Halcot next day? If only I had not been so shy, so foolish."

"It might have made no difference. I do not suppose she would help us, Gwen."

"Honor would tell us to look higher—to trust. Mother—God won't forsake us. He will bring us through somehow. There may be better days ahead. But it is terrible. Poor, poor father!"

CHAPTER VII.

MISS WITHERS.

LADY HALCOT sat in her favorite room, beside her davenport, writing letters—an occupation which filled many hours of each day. She was an active old lady, mentally as well as bodily, and took a keen personal interest in everything which concerned her estate and her tenants.

The letter-writing did not advance so well as usual this morning. Lady Halcot looked more than wontedly pale, and her bony hand trembled visibly. She laid down her pen and took it up again, several times, as if struggling against the weakness.

The placid fair-haired Miss Withers sat in the bow-window, over a small work-frame, and her eyes travelled repeatedly towards the old lady. She said at length, "Would you like me to send for Conrad?"

"What for?" asked Lady Halcot.

"I thought he might be a help—you seem scarcely equal to your work this morning."

"If I am not equal to the task of managing my own brains, Miss Withers, I certainly am not equal to the task of managing Mr. Withers' brains."

Miss Withers bore the remark meekly. After a pause she gave utterance to a low sigh, and a gentle—"Poor Conrad."

"He does his best. I am quite aware of that," said Lady Halcot, in a manner half-satirical, half-conciliatory. "He may improve in time. At all events we can hope so a little longer. When did Mr. Frosbrook say he would be here?"

"At about eleven."

"Half-past eleven now. I shall not wait in for him much longer."

The pen was laid down again, and Lady Halcot leaned back with a tired look.

"I think you have done too much lately," said Miss Withers.

"It is not 'doing.' Work never hurts me. I have a difficulty in making up my mind—"

Miss Withers said, "Yes?"

"I shall have to send for Mr. Selwyn again. His last visit was thrown away. I could come to no conclusion."

"About—?" said Miss Withers.

"Certain alterations which I desire to have made in my will. What else should I mean?"

Lady Halcot was, as a rule, reserved to a fault about her own affairs; but occasional little fits of unpremeditated frankness were among the signs of old age creeping over her. Miss Withers showed no excitement, but her pale blue eyes watched the face of Lady Halcot intently as a cat watches a bird.

"I supposed it was a question of some distant heir-at-law with you," she said slowly, and with seeming indifference.

"You supposed rightly, as regarding the title and the landed estate. But I have also property at my own disposal. However, there is no need to carry on the subject. It concerns myself alone—only sometimes I have a wish to get things settled and off my mind. I am not so young as I was, and responsibilities weigh more upon me than they once did. Be so good as to order the pony-carriage to be ready for me in half an hour, Miss Withers. I shall not wait any longer for Mr. Fosbrook."

Miss Withers moved in her soft and gliding fashion to obey. She was absent about ten minutes, and on coming back the sound of voices told her of the doctor's arrival meantime. Miss Withers waited outside a little longer, and then re-entered the boudoir.

"Mr. Fosbrook does not think there is much the matter with me," Lady Halcot said, turning

her head. "Not a break-up yet, by any means—eh, doctor? I am to take a tonic for a week or two. Not that I believe in tonics at my age. But it will do no harm. Mr. Fosbrook is giving me quite a glowing description, Miss Withers, of a young lady rescuing a little boy from drowning last week in Riversmouth. I cannot imagine how I have escaped hearing of it sooner. Did no report of the adventure reach your ears?"

"A mere report, nothing of consequence," Miss Withers said hesitatingly, with a faint blush. "I imagined it to be an exaggerated story."

"The courage and self-devotion of the young lady were hardly capable of exaggeration," Mr. Fosbrook said.

"Mr. Fosbrook is quite carried away by his admiration," said Lady Halcot. "But we may depend upon the correctness of an eye-witness. Go on, doctor, if you please; or stay—begin again, for Miss Withers' benefit."

Mr. Fosbrook obeyed without reluctance. He spoke quietly, and with no superabundance of adjectives; but as he described Gwendoline's position, and her brave plunge into deep water, his sallow cheek glowed, and a curious light shone in the old lady's black eyes.

Yet Lady Halcot's first remark at the close of

the tale was cynical. "So you were the rescuer, after all! Quite a poetical finale, Mr. Fosbrook. I suppose we may expect a third volume to the novel."

Mr. Fosbrook suddenly resumed his cool, professional manner. "You were not present, Lady Halcot. If you had been—but time is getting on."

"Not twelve yet. Wait a minute," said Lady Halcot. "That girl ought to have a medal, Mr. Fosbrook."

"So I said; but she would not hear of its being made known."

"She can't help it. Such a deed must become known. I will take action in the matter myself. What is her name, and where does she live? A 'young lady' you call her."

"She was down in Riversmouth merely for a day or two—quite a stranger to the place. Her name is Halcombe—Gwendoline Halcombe."

Mr. Fosbrook was of course aware of the relationship between Gwendoline Halcombe and Lady Halcot; doctors usually hear the little ins and outs of such matters. It was hardly likely that he should have practised sixteen years in Riversmouth, though originally not a native of the place, without knowing the tale of Lady Halcot's displeasure towards her niece. But he betrayed no consciousness in word or manner;

and whether or no Lady Halcot believed in his unconsciousness, she did not betray herself either.

"Gwendoline Halcombe," she repeated.

"A young artist from London, whom I believe you kindly purposed taking some notice of, Lady Halcot."

"Mr. Selwyn had mentioned her to me. Yes, I invited her to dinner, and she did not come. There was a note next morning, which spoke of an 'accidental wetting' in the sea as the cause. I confess I was displeased."

"The 'accidental wetting' was of a serious nature," said Mr. Fosbrook.

Lady Halcot sat considering; some strong feeling visible through the quick motions of her eyebrows.

"A pretty girl," she said at length, half to herself.

"Very pretty and ladylike," assented Mr. Fosbrook.

"Yes—ladylike. One could see that at a glance. The story interests me a good deal, Mr. Fosbrook. I like heroism, and I like to see it rewarded. Gwendoline Halcombe interests me also. Perhaps I may get her down here some day on a visit. She must be a girl of character. Yes—I should not mind seeing something more

of her. What do you say to the idea, Miss Withers?"

"I have not the pleasure of Miss Halcombe's acquaintance," said Miss Withers, trying to cover an unhappy expression with a smile. "She may no doubt be the kind of young person who would suit your ladyship."

"Young person!" said Lady Halcot, with an astonished air; and, when Mr. Fosbrook was gone, she added, "You seem to forget that Gwendoline Halcombe is my relative."

"I did not know your ladyship wished the fact to be remembered," faltered Miss Withers.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CALLER.

DINNER was just over at Mr. Selwyn's—a well-appointed and well-ordered meal always. Mr. Selwyn liked to have things “nice” about him, and he could afford to have them as he wished. He was tired with his day's work, not knocked up and exhausted, but just comfortably tired, able to enjoy the thought of a reposeful evening. Mrs. Selwyn, in a happy flutter of silk and lace, had made her way into the drawing-room, and thither the two gentlemen, father and son, had speedily followed her.

The son was very little younger than his step-mother, and he and she appeared to be on extremely pleasant terms. It would have been difficult to be on any other terms with Mortimer Selwyn. He was a thorough gentleman, sweet-tempered almost to a fault, fastidious on certain points, but never exacting. Many counted Mortimer a singular man. He was slightly lame, and had passed a sickly boyhood. Strange to say, he had never been put into any profession.

Mr. Selwyn through many widowed years had shrunk morbidly from parting with his only son. Mortimer was long counted unfit for hard work, and his mother's property being settled upon him, his future was amply provided for. So he had lived on at home, year after year, with no definite work in life.

No definite work, that is to say, provided for him by others. A plan which would have been utterly detrimental to ninety-nine young men in a hundred, had had no ill results with Mortimer. For he was by nature a man of thoughtful purpose and of literary tastes; and he was, *not* by nature, a man of high Christian principle. To fritter away his time in self-pleasing was not a possibility with Mortimer Selwyn. The work which had not been provided for him, he provided for himself. The life-aims which had not been set before him, he sought out and found. Strong as was the affection which existed between father and son, it was by no means the affection of unity in tastes, or likeness in manner of thought. Mortimer cared not a whit for the law, and Mr. Selwyn had small interest in his son's pursuits. Truth to tell, the latter were legion in number, and leisure was necessary for the appreciation of them. Mr. Selwyn was a man of no leisure, and a man of one primary pursuit. Mortimer was a man of boundless

leisure, which yet never implied idleness, and of multitudinous pursuits; among which literature, science, and philanthropy held no doubt the foremost places.

Also on religious points the two did not agree. Mr. Selwyn was not without a certain amount of religion, professed, and perhaps so far as it went, genuine. He was very reserved on such topics, and possibly felt more deeply than he allowed to appear. But he counted office-work and religion to be matters necessarily kept apart, to be in their nature "wide as the poles asunder;" the inevitable consequence of which view was that religion found itself in a small corner, the chief space in his time and thoughts being monopolized by "work."

Mortimer, on the contrary, was one whose very life was impregnated with religion, whose every word and action were as in the presence of the living God. He lost nothing in manliness by this; rather, he gained by it. But for this high consciousness, but for his vivid realization of the great realities of life and death and the future beyond, he might have sunk into a mere self-indulgent invalid, or, as health came to him in an unemployed youth, have rushed into a career of self-indulgent evil.

He was not much of a religious talker. He *could* speak, of course, and with glowing earnest-

ness, on the things which most occupied his mind, but he rarely spoke uninvited, and never thrust his opinions upon unwilling hearers. There was no need. Mortimer's manly, pleasant face spoke for itself; and the manner of his daily life had a clearer utterance for the honor of his Master's Name than any mere words could have had. Neither did he say much at any time about at least one chief part of his work in life. People heard of his coming and going, and saw his interest in science and literature. But of the many poor whom he visited, the sufferers lifted out of want by his hand, the struggling toilers helped onward, the gifts silently given where needed, of these the world in general knew nothing at all, or heard only a whisper here and there by accident.

A fire had been lighted more for cheerfulness than from necessity, since it was a warm spring day; and Mrs. Selwyn sat near it, making believe to get through a little fancy-work, in reality hoping for conversation. She hoped for some time in vain. Mortimer was deep in a periodical; and Mr. Selwyn apparently was deep in thought. He broke out suddenly, after a long pause,—

“You women are the most irrational beings—sometimes.”

“Thanks!” Isobel said drily

"Especially for the last qualifying word," added Mortimer, lifting a pair of amused eyes. "What unfortunate female has aroused your ire to-day, father?"

"I was merely thinking of my trip to Riversmouth last week, and of Miss Halcombe's extraordinary conduct."

"Miss Halcombe does not give one the impression that she is an irrational being exactly."

"I should have supposed her to be a young woman of remarkable sense," said Mr. Selwyn. "But to throw away such an opportunity—! However, it is done now, and cannot be undone. She will never have another."

"Is the old lady so vindictive?" asked Isobel.

Mr. Selwyn moved his shoulders. "Lady Halcot counted herself slighted. That was all."

"Miss Halcombe couldn't possibly have gone to the Leys in a draggle-tailed condition," said Isobel.

"Miss Halcombe had no business to become draggle-tailed," said Mr. Selwyn.

"Why, Stuart, I shall be quite frightened of you. I did not know you could be so severe."

The lawyer's face relaxed into a smile. "Was I severe? My regrets are all for Gwendoline Halcombe's own sake. She is a charming girl, and might have won the old lady over,—a most desirable thing for her parents. I fear there is no hope now of such a consummation."

The man-servant entered. "If you please, sir, Miss Halcombe desires a few words with you, if possible."

"Certainly," said Mr. Selwyn, though not quite pleased. He liked to keep business for business quarters, and to have his home inviolable. "Show her into my study."

"Stuart, do bring her here," interposed Isobel. "How odd that she should come, just when we were speaking about her! But I really am curious to see this little paragon of yours."

"Stay—" Mr. Selwyn said to the man. "Will you have her in at once, Isobel?"

"To be sure,—I should like it immensely. If she wants a private interview, you can take her to your study afterwards."

The man vanished, and Mortimer said quietly—"You will admire her."

"How do you know? Have you seen Miss Halcombe?"

"Yes—more than once."

"But I may not think her pretty."

"I think you will. You are not one of those women who cannot admire another pretty woman."

Isobel looked pleased. She liked words of appreciation from her step-son. There was no time for more, however. Gwendoline was already in the doorway.

There she paused. She had on her ulster, and her little cap with the wavy short hair showing below, as Mr. Selwyn had seen her on the shore; but no geranium-tint was in her pale cheeks, and the large brown eyes were opened with a startled and dazzled expression.

"I beg your pardon," she said, drawing back. "There is some mistake. I only wanted a few words with Mr. Selwyn alone."

"You shall have them, Miss Halcombe," said the lawyer. "But my wife wishes for the pleasure of your acquaintance, and she asked to make use of this opportunity. Come in and sit down. Isobel, this is Miss Halcombe."

"I have heard my husband speak of you," Isobel said kindly, leading Gwendoline to a chair, and giving Mortimer a glance expressive of admiration. He came forward, with his slight limp and his courteous manner, and as they shook hands a faint color rose for an instant to her cheeks. The paleness following was so marked that Mortimer said gravely, "You are not well, I am afraid."

"Thank you—I—" Gwendoline hesitated, as if trying to collect her thoughts. "I am only—a little—"

"Have you been wandering about London without food for hours?" he suggested, with a touch of reproach.

"I had dinner at one, only I could not eat," said Gwendoline, with difficulty. "It does not matter, thank you."

"My dear, you will be fainting away, if you don't take something," said Isobel, laying her plump little hand, with its diamond rings, upon Gwendoline's slender fingers. "Pray don't do that, for I have the greatest horror of seeing anybody faint. Here comes the coffee, just in time. Or would you rather have a glass of wine?"

"O no, coffee, please," said Gwendoline, and she was speedily served. A minute or two later, she could look up, with a sweet though, Isobel thought, touchingly sad smile, to say, "Thank you very much. I didn't quite know how much I wanted something."

"Have you had a very busy day?" asked Isobel kindly.

"Yes. I was sorry I could not get to Mr. Selwyn's office in time; but indeed I could not."

"Are you in a hurry now?" asked Isobel, noticing a furtive glance at the clock.

"I am afraid I ought not to wait. It is getting late—and I have so far to go."

"You ought not to go about like this, my dear, unprotected," said Isobel.

Gwendoline's lip quivered. She said only—"I must."

"How do you get home?"

"I shall walk part of the way, and catch an omnibus—somewhere—"

"It is not right," said Isobel.

Mr. Selwyn thought the same, but he did not say so.

"We must not delay you," he said, and he rose to lead the way into his study, followed by Gwendoline.

"I shall see you again some day," Isobel said cordially, pressing her hand; and Mr. Selwyn was some time closeted with the young girl. Coming out, Gwendoline was met in the hall by Mortimer.

"Pardon me," he said. "There is a cab at the door, waiting for you. Mrs. Selwyn and I could not be content to let you go any other way."

Gwendoline did not know what to say, and allowed herself to be handed in.

Mr. Selwyn presently found his way from the study to the drawing-room.

"I suppose I must not ask what the interview was about?" his wife said.

"It is easily told. Her father is to lose his situation at midsummer; and—unless by a miracle—he and they will then be almost penniless." Mr. Selwyn spoke in a moved tone. "That poor child! If ever I saw heart-break in a girl's

face—yet all the while so collected and womanly. Poor little Gwendoline !”

“ But can nothing be done ? ”

“ I have promised to inquire elsewhere for him—after other work. The matter does not look hopeful. Something may be found, no doubt. The difficulty is to find any opening for a man of his age, which will bring in enough to support such a family.”

“ Can’t you give him some money ? ”

“ A fifty-pound cheque would not go far towards keeping twelve people in comfort for a quarter of a year.”

Isobel thought of her last dressmaker’s bill, with a twinge of conscience.

“ Fifty pounds ! ” she repeated. “ It is perfectly appalling.”

The man-servant reappeared, and gave Mr. Selwyn a telegram. “ Do you know where Mr. Mortimer is ? ” Mr. Selwyn asked, opening it.

“ Yes, sir. Mr. Mortimer went upon the coach-box, to see the young lady safe home. He also said he had some one to call upon in that direction.”

Mr. Selwyn’s face wore a dubious expression. “ Humph ! ” he muttered, when the man was gone. “ Rather unnecessary philanthropy.”

“ Who is that from ? ”

"Lady Halcot again. She desires an interview immediately. I can't possibly go for three or four days."

"Lady Halcot seems to think you have nothing to do but to wait upon her," said Isobel.

Meanwhile Gwendoline, driving homewards alone in her cab, had time for sad thoughts and weariness. She was heavy at heart, and her interview with Mr. Selwyn had scarcely lightened the weight. He had not spoken in a sanguine tone about finding employment for her father, and the future looked very dark.

At the end of the street where she lived, the cab halted. Certain road-repairs made it impossible to proceed farther. Gwendoline was astonished to see a cloaked figure alight and come with limping step to the window.

"Miss Halcombe, shall we drive to the other end of the road—I suppose that will be open—or will you alight here?"

"Here, if you please; it is not far," she answered; and then she said, "Mr. Selwyn!"

"Excuse the liberty I have taken. There is a sick person in this neighborhood whom I wish to see, and I thought I might venture to utilize your coach-box."

Gwendoline descended and paused. "A sick person—at this time of night?"

"An old man, past eighty. He is bedridden, and suffers much from sleeplessness, and likes late visitors."

"But were you really going to-night? Is that your reason?"

"No," he said, smiling. "I was not going, but I have come—and it is true that I wished to see the old man. Also, I wished to see you safely home."

"The cabman," said Gwendoline, turning.

"I have not done with him yet. It will be all right."

"Don't come any farther, please. Good-night," said Gwendoline.

"I should like to see you to your door—but I can walk behind, if you like."

"O no, no—nonsense," said Gwendoline hurriedly, breaking into a laugh, which was almost a sob. "You are very kind—only I don't think it is right that you should have the trouble."

Mortimer made no answer to this. They crossed the road together, and he said quietly, after a slight break—"There are some days in which it is difficult to see the light behind the cloud."

"I can't see any light at all to-day," said Gwendoline sadly.

"And yet it is there."

"I can't see it," repeated Gwendoline.

"I saw from your face that you were in trouble—'walking in darkness,' perhaps, and 'having no light.' Then, Miss Halcombe—'let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.'"

"Could you do that, if everything was being swept away from you?" asked Gwendoline bitterly.

Mortimer's manner changed, and his voice grew strangely humble. "I dare not say," he answered. "If God gave me grace—yes—not otherwise. It has not been God's will to try me thus. How easy for me in my circumstances to look on and tell another to trust. And yet—I too have known times of darkness and pain, and I have proved the loving faithfulness of my God. Surely I have a right to speak, without presumption. Miss Halcombe, his fatherly care will *not* come to an end. He will *not* fail thee, nor forsake thee."

Gwendoline lifted her face, wet with tears, as they paused at the door of the house. "Thank you," she said tremulously. "O thank you! I think I was forgetting. Honor has so often said the same. I know it is so, really. But it isn't easy always to feel sure. Good-bye."

She gave him her hand, and he bent his head, with a murmur which sounded like—"God bless you." Then he was gone, and she stood

dreamily listening to the sound of his unequal steps passing into the distance. Mr. Halcombe answered the bell.

"Gwen, my child, you are late," he said. "We were growing anxious."

"I could not help it, father. I could not get to Mr. Selwyn's in time, and I have been all the way to his own home. He was very kind—and Mr. Mortimer Selwyn called a cab, and saw me home, and would not let me pay. I don't know whether I ought to have allowed it."

They moved slowly into the deserted dining-room, where the boys had been doing lessons all the evening; and where a tumbler of milk and some bread and butter waited on the table.

"Ruth left these for you. She had to go upstairs to do some mending for the children; and your mother was knocked up, so we persuaded her to go to bed early. You must want food, Gwen."

"No, I had something. I can't eat, father."

She drank the milk; then put her two arms round him, as he stood beside the mantel-piece, and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Poor worn-out child, always toiling for others," he said sadly. "It grieves me that the burdens of life should come upon you so early. You are not fitted for them yet—under twenty, my Gwennie. Ten years later I should not

mind. I wish I could shelter my darling a little longer."

"It will all come right by-and-by," murmured Gwen.

"I ought to have gone to Mr. Selwyn's, and not you, my dear."

"O no, father—I am glad I went. I know Mr. Selwyn best, and he is always kind to me. But he did not seem very—hopeful—"

"He would not wish to pledge himself to anything of course. And he is a busy man. I hardly see what we can expect from him."

A cold shiver ran through Mr. Halcombe's whole frame, communicating itself to the slight figure which rested against him. The prospect ahead seemed to him so utterly chill and dark. He had almost no private means. Victor received a small salary, and Gwendoline could make a few pounds here or there by painting little pictures; but with the loss of his situation in the bank, all other means of livelihood were swept away.

"Father, something will turn up. We shall be cared for," said Gwendoline.

"I am trying to think so, Gwen, but it is a hard trial of my faith."

"God will not fail us," said Gwendoline, half-unconsciously echoing Mortimer's words.

"He has never failed me yet, but I never came

before to such a strait as this. It is utter darkness—utter destitution.”

“But God can help us. It isn’t too hard for him,” whispered Gwendoline.

Then the poor tired girl burst into tears. “O father, if only I had seen Lady Halcot—if only that had not been prevented. Ruth wouldn’t have been so easily hindered, in my place. Why did I not go to her the next day? It does seem so terrible that I may have stopped help from coming to you and mother. I don’t know how to bear the thought.”

“You acted for the best. It is of God’s ordering, Gwen.”

“Father, why don’t you write to Lady Halcot and ask help?”

He shook his head. “No use. I have tried that plan before.”

“Then let me write. May I do it? I think my note of excuse was too short. I didn’t want to make a fuss, and perhaps I went too far the other way. Honor thought so. May I write, father?”

She grew eager over the idea, and her cheeks flushed. “I know what to say,” she went on. “It all seems coming to me, like daylight. Shall I show you the letter, or shall I tell her that no one has seen it?”

“I think that would be best,” said Mr. Hal-

combe slowly. "I do not wish to prevent your making the attempt, my dear, as a satisfaction to yourself. But nothing will come of it. I know Lady Halcot better than you, and I have no hope whatever of any favorable result. Better say nothing to your mother or Ruth. It will probably end in disappointment."

"I am not so sure," said Gwendoline softly. "It might be the way God would help us, father. I think I am right just to try. But I will not say a word to anybody. I'll write the letter now, before I go to bed."

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED PROPOSAL.

THREE days passed, and an answer came from Lady Halcot, addressed to Gwendoline, in her ladyship's bold handwriting. Gwendoline did not know the writing, but crest and post-mark told their tale. Tea and mutton-chops were in full swing when the letter arrived, and under cover of the boys' chatter Gwendoline was able to peruse it, almost unnoticed.

"DEAR GWENDOLINE HALCOMBE:—Your letter has reached me, and I have also heard in other quarters of your late courageous conduct with respect to a drowning child. I like bravery in a woman, and I congratulate you.

"Your father's present position is only what was to be expected sooner or later, under the circumstances.

"I am not unwilling to help, but it must be in my own manner, and on my own terms.

"These terms are as follows:

"I wish you, Gwendoline Halcombe, to leave your present home, and to reside entirely with me at the Leys. You will then be under my control, occupying the position of my adopted child; and so long as you submit to my will, I undertake to provide handsomely for your future.

"At the same time, and as a corollary to this state of things, I

consent to settle the sum of 500*l.* per annum upon your father and mother, for the term of their natural lives, and survivor continuing to receive the same until his or her death, after which the annuity will revert to me or my heirs, as I shall appoint.

"I do not wish to cut you off entirely from your family, but you must understand that I have personally no interest in your relatives. You may keep up a moderate correspondence with your home-circle, and once in two years I shall permit you to go home for a month.

"I state the matter thus clearly at the beginning that there may be no mistakes. This is a purely business letter. I may add, however, that if you decide to accept this proposal, my wish will be to make your life a happy one. I like your face, and I believe you would suit me well.

"You may consider the matter at your leisure, and, if you will, consult my lawyer, Mr. Selwyn. I am informing him of what I propose to do, and I believe him to be an acquaintance of yours.

"I do not press for a hasty decision, but I do desire you, Gwendoline Halcombe, to understand that your decision either way is to be a *permanent* decision. You do not come to the Leys on trial for a few months, to grow tired of the place and throw it up. If you come, you remain.

"Also you must please to understand that on these terms only will I assist your parents. If you decline my offer for yourself, my offer of aid to them falls to the ground.

"I remain, yours truly,

"H. HALCOT."

"Who is your letter from, Gwen?" asked Victor. "It doesn't look like the handwriting of a young lady friend."

Gwendoline heard the words, but did not gather their sense. A sensation of being suffo-

cated came over her, and voices buzzed loudly in her ears. She stood up panting.

"Gwen!" said Mrs. Halcombe, while her father watched her anxiously. "My dear, are you ill?"

"Oh, mother, mother!" cried Gwendoline, in an agony, which was not all pain. Perplexity and bewilderment had a share in her distress.

"Gwen, don't frighten us all," said Ruth, roughly. "What is the matter?"

Gwendoline grew suddenly calm, awaking to the fact that she might not explain hastily before the children. None but Ruth and Victor, beside herself, knew of the impending trouble. She sat down and spoke quietly: "Never mind just now, Ruth. It is only something that I must tell mother and father presently."

"Delightfully vague, now you have put us all on the rack of curiosity," said Victor.

"Would you rather come and tell me now, Gwen?" asked her father.

Gwendoline saw that waiting was no easy matter to him. She rose and put the letter into his hands; and instead of returning to her seat, left the room.

"Gwen is altogether upset by her Riversmouth trip," said Ruth, in a tone of some sharpness. "I don't know what has come over her. Is anything wrong, father?"

Mr. Halcombe made no reply, and Ruth knew better than to ask again. He perused the letter slowly, and at length looked up to meet his wife's eyes.

"Nellie, you had better take this, and give it back to Gwen yourself, after reading it," he said, and he came round the table to her side. "Tell her there is no need for any haste as to a decision." Mr. Halcombe spoke low, as if not intending others to hear, and as if scarcely conscious that the children's voices had dropped into silence. "Gwen wrote to Lady Halcot, and this is her reply. We thought it best not to trouble you about the matter sooner."

Ruth's face showed pique at not having been taken into confidence. Mrs. Halcombe was not given to feeling pique at imaginary slights: but the sight of the familiar handwriting evidently stirred her keenly. She began to read, sitting still at the head of the table, which was not what her husband had intended. He had wished her to leave the room first.

"Don't you think you had better go to Gwen, dear?" he asked.

She answered dreamily—"Yes, directly—" and read on, not slowly as he had done, but glancing more and more rapidly from sentence to sentence, while a look of dismay gathered over her face.

"O no, no, no—impossible," she said at the end, standing up, and fixing a startled gaze on her husband. "Quite impossible! O no, we could never consent to it."

Mr. Halcombe did not enter upon the question, there and then. He put a hand upon her arm, and only said gently—"Go and tell Gwen what you think about it."

"It can never, never be, James. Impossible!"

Mrs. Halcombe went hurriedly away, and Mr. Halcombe returned to his seat. But the last half of his mutton-chop remained uneaten, and his cup of tea stood till it was cold. Ruth asked at length—"Father, has anything fresh happened?" Mr. Halcombe said gravely—"You will know in good time, Ruth:" and then his face was hidden in his hands. Ruth's voice grew somewhat querulous, but a certain awe-struck silence remained upon all the others till the meal was over.

Mrs. Halcombe did not find her daughter in the drawing-room, so she went straight up-stairs to the little bed-room overhead, occupied by the three sisters.

"Gwen, may I come in?" she asked, and the door was immediately unlocked.

"Gwennie, it can never, never be," said Mrs. Halcombe tremblingly. "It can never be, my child."





For a minute or more they remained silently side by side. p. 105.

That was all that either of them said at first. Gwendoline shut the door again, and went back to the window where she had been standing. Mrs. Halcombe followed her, and for a minute or more they remained silently side by side, looking out into the quiet dingy street, with the dull row of houses opposite. Quiet, dingy, dull—the surroundings were such, undoubtedly. Yet this was Gwendoline's home. It had been her home from infancy. Never till this hour had she known how much she loved it.

But presently the two faces turned as if instinctively away from the street to meet each the other. Mrs. Halcombe was agitated and tearful still. Gwendoline was very quiet and pale, with a certain grave resoluteness in her large, liquid brown eyes. Mrs. Halcombe saw and was alarmed.

"Gwennie, it can never be," she said again, and she took Gwendoline's hands between her own. "Never, my darling. How could we give you up? O no, it is quite impossible. Anything, rather than to lose our Gwen. It would break my heart. I could not bear it, darling."

"Anything—mother!"

"I do not say it unsubmitively, Gwen. 'Anything' as a matter of choice, I mean. If it were God's will to take you from us, I could submit

—I hope—without murmuring. He would give me power. It would be very terrible, but it would be his will. But to send you away ourselves—for our own personal gain—O no, no, no—it is out of the question.”

Gwendoline’s little hands seemed to turn to ice in Mrs. Halcombe’s grasp, yet there was about her no other sign of strong emotion.

“Mother, suppose it is not a question of your doing at all? Suppose it is God’s will for me? Suppose he is taking me from you, just as plainly as if he did it through death? After all, mother dear, this would not be so bad as that.”

“O Gwen—hush!”

“But I don’t think I must hush. The matter has to be looked in the face. I felt all in a whirl at the first moment, but since I came up here I have been trying to weigh it quietly.”

“Your father told me to say that there must be no hasty decision,” said Mrs. Halcombe, in a tone of keen suffering.

“No hasty decision either way. That is what he means. You want to say at once that it cannot be, but I want you to look at both sides of the question. Mother, suppose we turn from this—suppose we say ‘no’ to Lady Halcot’s offer, and refuse her help? What is to become of us all?”

"God will take care of us," faltered Mrs. Halcombe.

"Yes, in his own way. But how if this is his way? If we refuse it, because it is not exactly according to our mind, have we any right to expect more—any right to think he will work a miracle to support us? Think, mother, there will be absolutely almost nothing to live upon. Suppose father finds a clerkship of one or two hundred a year! It would hardly put bread into our mouths—yet he is not likely to do better. It has been hard work enough to drag along upon three hundred and eighty. But fancy what it would be with less than half that—and we don't even know that father would have so much as half. If no alternative had come, I would say with you to the last that we must trust on, and that God would help us. I know he would, mother. But if the help comes, and we fling it away, how can we still look up, and believe that he will arrange for our needs?"

"It cannot be right to give you up—it cannot be, Gwen," Mrs. Halcombe murmured in answer.

"If it were a question of my being married, you would not feel so. You would give me up quite happily then. This isn't so very different, after all;" and Gwendoline tried to smile. "You will know that I am well cared for, and

that I have a comfortable home. And I shall have the great joy of feeling that you are all getting along in comfort, without the terrible pull that it has been of late. Five hundred a year isn't wealth for a family of twelve, but it is more than we have ever had yet; and you will be one less in number; and Victor will soon be earning more; and father will try to get some work. Only think how well off you will all be. Why, you will grow positively luxurious—only not so luxurious as I shall be at the Leys. I wonder if Lady Halcot will give me a lady's maid all to myself. You see, I am to be her adopted child, not her lady-companion, mother. I shall not know myself, in such a grand position."

Gwendoline's bright manner almost deceived her mother, despite her extreme paleness.

"Gwen, do you really wish to go? I was forgetting that part of the matter. You would have every comfort and luxury, as you say. It may be selfishness on my part, to wish to keep you from such a life."

Gwendoline made no answer to this, but her mother, watching steadily the quivering white lips, knew what the silence meant.

"Forgive me, Gwen," she whispered. "I understand now."

"Oh, mother, don't—we must be brave,"

half-sobbed Gwendoline. "It has to be—it must be."

"I do not feel so, Gwennie. If you wished to go, I could not wish to keep you back. But I know Lady Halcot, and I cannot believe you would be happy with her; and to send you there merely for our gain is out of the question. Don't be afraid, my darling. We will live on dry bread, and work our fingers to the bone, sooner than part with our Gwen."

Gwendoline allowed herself to be kissed and comforted, and did not attempt immediately to controvert her mother's words. But when her tears were dried, the look of resolution had not passed from her brown eyes.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT HAD TO BE.

RUTH took a different view of the matter, as was perhaps to be expected from her sensible and matter-of-fact nature.

"Of course I have nothing to do with deciding," she said, when called into consultation that same evening by her father and mother and sister, "but if I am to give my opinion honestly I certainly do think that to throw aside such an opening would be the height of absurdity—almost a sort of madness. It is not as if we should lose Gwendoline. Mother talks about 'giving her up,' but there is no 'giving up' in the question, that I can see. She will belong to us still, just as much as ever, and we shall see her now and then."

"Once in two years, Ruth," Mrs. Halcombe said mournfully.

"Of course that is rather seldom," admitted Ruth. "But very likely Lady Halcot will make it once a year, as soon as she sees that we do not pester her in any way. Meantime we shall

know that Gwen has every imaginable comfort and pleasure, and Gwen will know that we are all getting along, with enough to eat and to wear. Surely that is better than our all being reduced to a miserable struggle for bread. Mother talks about our all working our fingers to the bone, for the sake of keeping Gwen with us. I am willing enough to do my share, but Gwen is the last to like to do her share."

"Ruth!" her father said reproachfully. He had said little yet, apparently preferring to hear others' opinions before giving his own.

"I mean her share of needlework, father. Gwen has certainly no gift in that direction, and she detests it with all her heart. Besides, to think of supporting a family of twelve by needlework is absurd. And as for keeping Gwen with us by any amount of work, it is just an impossibility. If she does not go to Lady Halcot's we shall both have to go out as governesses. I had quite made up my mind to that, before Lady Halcot's letter came. But if the offer had come to me, I would very much rather live at the Leys, than be a governess, even though I might not be free to come home quite so often."

Ruth's severe common-sense was taking effect, and she saw this in the expression of her mother's face.

"Besides," she added, after a little pause, "I

do think that poor old lady must be dreadfully lonely in her big house, with nobody belonging to her. It is her own fault, of course. Still, if mother is as fond of Lady Halcot as we have always thought, I should think she would like Gwen to be there, particularly."

Mrs. Halcombe received this little fling meekly. "Yes, Ruthie," she said, "for Lady Halcot's own sake I could like nothing better. But I must think about Gwen first. I do not know whether Gwen could be happy there. Lady Halcot is very stern and sharp—and the matter once done cannot be undone."

"Mother, I think one may be happy anywhere, if God has put one there," Gwendoline said softly. "And I think I should make Lady Halcot fond of me."

"As to happiness," quoth Ruth, "isn't it the very kind of life that Gwen has often wished for, away from London crowds, and near sea and country, plenty of money and leisure, and no children?"

Gwendoline's eyes were blinded with tears. "Oh, Ruth, you need not have thrown that at me just now."

"Why? I don't mean anything unkind," said Ruth, her rather obtuse sensibilities stirred by Gwendoline's look of pain. "I am sure you have often said you wished it."

Mr. Halcombe drew his chair a little nearer, and leaned forward gravely.

"Ruth has had her say. Now listen to me," he said. "I have tried from the first to take a dispassionate view of the question, praying to be guided into a right decision. We must not be swayed by mere feelings. The thought of parting with our Gwen is a very painful one, but as Ruth truly says, the parting probably must take place, one way or another. My first impulse was like yours, Nellie, that we could not send our child away for our own advantage. But remember two things. First, it is not for our advantage only. Gwen is one of ten, and the comforts of the other nine have to be considered. Would it be lawful to sacrifice the prospects of those nine, for our own selfish gratification in keeping Gwen, even if we could hope to keep her ultimately. Secondly, we have to think of Gwen herself. This is an opening which probably means a life of ease and of comparative wealth in place of long years of struggling in poverty as an artist. Putting altogether on one side other questions involved, could we rightly refuse this for her? Gwen may shrink from leaving us; but I, her father, should shrink yet more from keeping her under the circumstances."

Gwendoline broke into his words suddenly.

"Father, it isn't for my own sake that I want to go."

"I know it, dear; but my thought has been for you, at least as much as for the others. There is yet another view of the matter, which I believe Gwen has already considered. Nellie, we have had for days past a heavy trouble impending—a very terrible perplexity as to our future. We have pleaded in prayer with our God, that he would show us where to walk—would supply us with some means of livelihood. Here is, or here seems to be, the response. A way is plainly opened. Shall we dare to refuse it?"

Mrs. Halcombe was weeping quietly, but she shook her head, and all knew that the matter was decided.

"Still," Mr. Halcombe said, after a pause, as if with a sudden sense of reluctance, "still—if Gwennie were doubtful or unwilling, we would hesitate—would consult others. Mr. Selwyn, for instance."

But Gwendoline lifted her head, and looked straight at him with bright clear eyes.

"I am not doubtful, and I am quite willing," she said. "I have known from the first moment that it must be—must be, father. How could we decide otherwise? Father, I don't think it is for my own sake that I wish to go,

though of course I know it will be a life of ease. I know I have complained sometimes—at least, I suppose I have—but indeed my choice could never be to live away from you all—and from mother.” Gwendoline’s voice grew husky. “But this is not choice. I don’t see that any choice at all is left me. Nothing short of your positive command could make it right for me to refuse to go. How could I deliberately drag you all down to such miserable poverty?”

There was no more discussion about the manner of answer to be sent to Lady Halcot, though by common consent the letter itself was deferred till the next day. “I am not sure that it would not be wise for you to have a few words with Mr. Selwyn before writing,” Mr. Halcombe said.

Half-an-hour later the “few words” became unexpectedly an immediate possibility. A caller’s knock was followed by the entrance of Mr. Selwyn himself, in so hearty a mood of pleasure and satisfaction, that Mr. and Mrs. Halcombe began to wake up to the fact of something good having really happened. He had received a letter from Lady Halcot that afternoon, stating her intentions with respect to Gwendoline.

“I could not have wished anything better,” the kind-hearted lawyer said. “My wife is de-

lighted, and she would let me have no peace till I came off to congratulate you all. It is rather late for a call, but to-morrow I shall not have a spare moment. Of course there can be no question about acceptance of the offer. It does away with all your most pressing anxieties, and places Gwendoline at once in a position of positive affluence." He quite forgot at the moment that he always called her "Miss Halcombe" to her face. "As for the future, though Lady Halcot will not exactly pledge herself to anything, she evidently wishes it to be understood that Gwendoline will be well provided for."

"Handsomely," she says, observed Mr. Halcombe, and Gwendoline gave her letter to Mr. Selwyn. He read it deliberately.

"Ah—yes—just so. Better keep that letter, Mr. Halcombe. Yes—just so—exactly: merely the little condition of implicit obedience."

"I shall always do what Lady Halcot tells me, if it is not wrong," said Gwendoline quietly.

"Precisely so," repeated the lawyer, with a slightly dubious expression.

"That is all that you can say—of course. Your mother has no doubt told you that Lady Halcot is an old lady of peculiar temperament. It is well to avoid little differences."

"Gwen is not argumentative," said Mr. Halcombe, with a fond sad look at her.

CHAPTER XI.

AMID NEW SCENES.

“THE sore part of the matter is that it seems to be sent upon me as a sort of judgment, Honor?”

“What can you possibly mean, Gwen?” Honora Dewhurst asked, with an accent of astonishment.

The two stood side by side upon a broad platform, near the train which was soon to bear Gwendoline Halcombe to her new home. They were early, for Mr. Halcombe was a nervous man as to journeys, and he always insisted on a start being made about twenty minutes sooner than was necessary. Neither he nor Victor were free to accompany Gwendoline to the station, and Ruth had a cold, and Gwendoline had implored her mother not to come. She could not bear the thought of *that* parting being in public. So Honora Dewhurst undertook to see her off.

The leave-takings were thus over, and Gwendoline had borne herself bravely through them.

Now she only looked white and quiet, with a glitter of unshed tears in her brown eyes, which had a wide-open fixed look, as if hardly seeing anything around. She had stood about absently, while Honora saw to her luggage.

"You will not care to take your seat yet," Honora said, when the little business was done. "Shall we go into the waiting-room, or stay here?" And Gwendoline, instead of answering, broke out with her remark about "the sore part of the matter."

"What can you possibly mean, Gwen?"

"I mean just what I say. It is like a sort of judgment upon me. I don't know whether I have complained in words often—I think not—but in my heart I have often wanted to have things different. I have been so tired of the crowd and the noise and the worry, and sometimes I have so longed to be quiet, and to have freedom of leisure and thought for my painting—not to be incessantly driven along to do my utmost, and still to feel that our heads are really never quite above water. Sometimes out-of-doors I have looked at others driving past, in their comfort and ease, and wondered over the difference between their lives and mine. Not enviously, exactly—for I have never really wished to choose for myself, or to have what was not God's will for me. But it has been

cloudiness and murmuring. It hasn't been a spirit of perfect content."

"I wonder how many of us have attained to 'perfect content,' my dear child," Honora said.

"You have, for one. But don't you see what I mean? I *have* murmured, Honor. It is of no use to deny the fact. I have not loved God's will for me. And now it seems so terribly as if he had taken me at my word, and had given me what I craved—in displeasure. I can't talk about this to anybody except you; but it presses on me constantly."

"A child can't always read his father's motives. Don't be too sure as to the 'displeasure.'"

"But if it were—"

"If it were—plead at his feet for more grace for the future, and cling the closer to Christ. Don't echo Peter's cry of 'depart from me.' The more sinful we are, the more we need him."

"But if he should have sent this in anger, without his blessing!"

Honora slipped an arm through her friend's, and spoke slowly, "Gwen, you are overwrought and upset to-day, and this is temptation to unworthy thoughts of your loving God. Suppose it were sent in displeasure for the past—what does it mean but that he wills to draw you through chastening nearer to himself? But I

don't feel at all sure that it is so. You have been over-worked and tried, and trouble has pressed heavily, and you have all prayed that help might come, and here is the answer. Surely it is not *all* chastening, Gwen. You are to have a happy home, and the joy of knowing that those dearest to you will be living a life of comparative ease,—through your going away. Some pain comes with the joy, of course, but isn't that what one always has to expect?"

"Yes,—if I have not brought it on myself," murmured Gwendoline.

"Suppose you have,—since you are bent upon that view of the matter,—what then? If you have yielded to temptation, he will forgive you for the past, and will strengthen you for the future. I can't understand that sort of suspicious spirit in one of his children,—always fancying that he is acting in displeasure. Of course there are times when he must do so, and I don't deny it, but I do say we don't know one-hundredth part of his pitying tenderness to us. David's way of looking at things was very different:—'He will not be always chiding,'—that is the prayer-book version, and I love it, Gwen. 'He crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies.' 'The Lord is gracious and full of compassion; slow to anger and of great mercy.' Try for more of a trusting spirit."

Gwendoline's face changed, and two large tears fell heavily.

"Yes—now you will feel better. It is of no use trying to persuade yourself that pain is not pain. You cannot but feel the parting."

"It is my mother—chiefly," said Gwendoline sorrowfully. "If Ruth were different! Mother and I have always been one. Ruth is very good, and she will do anything for anybody, but she does not understand. Honor, you will go in sometimes, to cheer my mother."

"By talking about you. Yes, certainly. I must say a word to you now about something else. Our time is nearly up. You know I generally run down to Riversmouth for a night or more, at least once or twice a year—"

"Oh, Honor, when you do, be sure to let me know beforehand."

"I'll see. But one word, Gwen. Remember, you will be Lady Halcot's adopted child, a very 'grand young person,' indeed, as my good old uncle would say; and I shall only be a poor artist, niece of a retired tradesman—"

"Honor! As if that could make any difference in my love for you," cried Gwendoline indignantly.

"My dear child, I quite understand. It will make no difference in your love. But you will not be your own mistress, and it may not be in

your power to see anything of me. For it will be your plain duty to obey Lady Halcot in everything—short of what is wrong.”

Gwendoline’s cheeks were burning. “That would be wrong—to forsake a friend, my best and dearest friend.”

“You will not forsake me. You and I are friends for life, for more than merely this lower life, I hope. We will love and trust one another to the last. That is just what I want you to understand. If you never come near me, never write to me, and pass me in the street without a smile or bow, I shall not be pained, for I shall trust you still. I shall know you are not acting by your own choice, but only in obedience to Lady Halcot. Mind, darling, I mean it. Now don’t!” for Gwendoline, brave through all the partings, burst into a passion of tears.

“Gwennie, don’t break your heart over so small a matter. I tell you I shall not be even pained. If ever you come and say to me with your own lips that you have changed, and that you love me no longer, then I shall be bitterly grieved. Short of that I will never fail to trust you. Remember, you owe Lady Halcot a great deal. And apart from gratitude, you have to keep things smooth for your mother’s sake. You may or may not be allowed to keep up a correspondence with me; but I am pretty sure

you will not be allowed to call upon me at Gladiolus Cottage. But I shall hear all about you from your mother, and that will content me."

"O Honor! Honor!"

"Hush, hush," Honor said, as to a troubled child. "I am only anticipating what will be perfectly natural on her ladyship's part. Now you have to be good and cheery. Don't let me have to take back a tale of tears at the last; and don't arrive at the Leys with red eyes on any account. Come—there is the bell, and you must get in. First class!—you 'grand young person.' Good-bye, my own Gwen."

Others were pressing into the same compartment, and Honora had to step back. Further conversation was impossible. Gwendoline gazed and kissed her hand to the last, and Honora walked rapidly away, drawing down her veil to conceal something which till that moment she had resolutely restrained. For Honora's was a lonely life. She had no near relatives, and few friends; and Gwendoline had been her one sunbeam of earthly delight.

Gwendoline shed no more tears. It was by no means her usual fashion to yield to strong feeling in public. She sat quietly in her corner, pale and sad, looking out upon the rushing landscape, thinking much upon the faces she had left, and

speculating somewhat on the new phase of existence which lay before her. "I shall need to live very near to God, if I am to keep straight at Riversmouth," was the conclusion to which she came. "I think there must be great danger in ease and wealth—especially for me. I shall want so much 'keeping,' not to grow cold or careless. But mother and father and Honor will pray for me."

With this thought in her mind she reached the station nearest to Riversmouth. Her first instinctive move, as she descended, was to seek her luggage; but a drab-liveried footman, of deferential manners, presented himself, in readiness to take all trouble off her hands. "Miss Halcombe?" he said inquiringly; and then—"Her ladyship is waiting. How many boxes, if you please?"

Gwendoline began to wake up to the change in her manner of life. She was vaguely conscious that her single trunk, even with the addition of a small packing-case containing her paintings, appeared to the tall footman a most moderate amount of luggage; but he was far too well-bred to show his thoughts, and Gwendoline had little of the shallow pride which troubles itself unnecessarily about appearances. She was quite aware also, and equally without distress, that her scanty wardrobe would prove by no means in keeping

with her new position. But Lady Halcot, when sending money for her journey, had written—"You need not mind about dress. I will see to that. Come just as you are;" and Gwendoline had obeyed this injunction literally. She only had two dresses, and she wore the best of the two, a simple costume of navy-blue serge, together with her little Sunday bonnet of black velvet, home-made, and her plain cloth jacket.

The handsome landau, with two thoroughbred bays, stood outside the station; and Lady Halcot sat alone in it, muffled up in furs still, despite the mild spring weather, and seeming half-buried beneath the piles of the ponderous scarlet-lined rug. She scanned the station-door persistently, till a girlish figure came quietly out and stood beside the carriage, waiting as if for a welcome. Lady Halcot's keen black eyes ran swiftly over Gwendoline from head to foot, and Gwendoline's pale face flushed brightly, as she lifted her brown eyes with a look of wistful anxiety.

Those who knew her ladyship's turns of expression would have judged her to be well satisfied with the brief inspection. But it was not Lady Halcot's way to show her feelings. She merely said "How do you do?" putting out two fingers of a kid-clothed bony hand. "I hope you have had a comfortable journey."

The footman held open the carriage-door, and

in obedience to a slight gesture from Lady Halcot, Gwendoline stepped in.

"You have given orders about Miss Halcombe's luggage?" Lady Halcot said.

"I have, my lady. It will be sent directly."

"That will do."

And they were off, passing first a few streets of the little country town, then bowling with smooth rapidity through high roads and narrow lanes, between green hedge-rows. Gwendoline leaned back against the soft cushions, with the heavy rug over her knees; and the upright drab backs of coachman and footman rising, square and motionless, in front; and the little old lady, with Roman nose and severe lips, seated silently by her side. "What would mother feel to see me now?" she thought. "This is very comfortable. How lazy I shall grow!" and a half-smile broke unconsciously over her face.

"Are you always called 'Gwendoline' at home?" asked Lady Halcot suddenly.

The smile faded. "No—'Gwen' generally," was the answer.

"You will be Gwendoline in future. I object to abbreviations."

Gwendoline wondered what would come next.

"Whom are you supposed to resemble among your relatives?" Lady Halcot inquired after a pause, in the same abrupt fashion.

"My father," Gwendoline said at once.

"Quite a mistake. You are not in the least like him—like what he was as a young man."

Gwendoline was surprised, for she had never before heard the fact of this resemblance questioned.

"My mother always seems to think so," she said.

"Entirely a mistake," repeated Lady Halcot, and there was another break.

"However, it does not signify. Likeness is very often a matter of expression, sometimes a matter of fancy. You are a very pretty girl, Gwendoline. Of course you know this, so I shall not make you vain by telling you so."

The old lady looked hard at Gwendoline to see the effect of her words. She could not understand the expression that came over those brown eyes, an expression certainly more sorrowful than gratified. Gwendoline said gently, after a moment's thought, "I suppose I am, Lady Halcot, but sometimes I wish people would not tell me so."

"Why not?"

"It would be better for me. I don't want to be made to think about myself."

For full five minutes Lady Halcot was dumb. Then the silence was broken by the two simultaneously, a remark breaking from each at

exactly the same instant. Lady Halcot had been turning over Gwendoline's words in her mind; and Gwendoline's gaze had been roving about the landscape.

"Gwendoline, are you a very religious person?"

"The sea! O Lady Halcot—the sea!"

Lady Halcot's expression relaxed, and she put aside her own question, following it up by another in a different tone:—"You admire the sea?"

"I love it dearly. For years I have had a dream of living near the sea. It always looked like perfect happiness."

Lady Halcot was certainly pleased. She said with positive cordiality, "I hope you will be happy;" and began pointing out whatever was worth noting in the views. Her question remained unanswered, and at the time Gwendoline scarcely took in the meaning of it; yet the words afterwards haunted her a good deal.

CHAPTER XII.

GWEN'S POSSESSIONS.

“**N**ONE of these are fit to wear. They can be given away at once,” said Lady Halcot decisively.

Gwendoline had passed a night in her new home, and had risen refreshed, despite some wakeful periods of restless thought. It seemed to her already a very long time since she had come to this place. That less than twenty hours of her residence at the Leys had yet elapsed was inconceivable.

She had made acquaintance with the massive building, reared in far back days by Lady Halcot's forefathers, passing through rooms and ante-chambers and corridors, till mind and memory became confused. She had gone the round of the stiff ancestral portraits in the state dining room, privately wondering which might be termed the ugliest; for the Halcots were by no means a handsome race. She had stood in the library, examining the rows of calf-bound volumes, hoping to be allowed free access to the

same. She had had a glimpse of the wide-spreading gardens and extensive hot-houses, and had paced one of the broad terraces, in full view of the blue ocean.

Also, Gwendoline had already won the hearts of two or three of the servants, by her gentle manner of speaking, more especially the heart of Spurrell, the maid appointed to wait upon herself. She had made acquaintance with the pallid and mild-mannered Miss Withers, and had taken herself severely to task for an irresistible sense of distrust and almost aversion towards that placid individual. Miss Withers treated her with such marked and humble politeness! why could not she like Miss Withers better? Moreover, she had seen the unfortunate Conrad, as usual spending half his day at the Leys, and as usual in difficulties. Conrad Withers did not live in the house, but he was expected to occupy a certain room during certain hours, and he received liberal remuneration for a small amount of toil. Miss Withers had set her heart on seeing him reside at the Leys, in the capacity of confidential secretary to her ladyship; but this aim was as yet far from being attained. Lady Halcot endured him, and no more. Gwendoline had exchanged a few sentences with the young man, pitying his bashfulness, and Conrad's head was already turned.

Breakfast had been long ended, when Gwendoline was summoned to her own room, there to find Lady Halcot and Spurrell, the whole of her small wardrobe having been spread out for inspection.

This room was one of the pleasantest parts of Gwendoline's new life, being large, yet not too large, with a sunshiny aspect, flowers without and within, choice engravings upon the walls, and abundant comfort in furniture and fittings-up. Opening into the bedroom was a small and pretty boudoir, with a davenport and easy chair near the fireplace, and an easel in the bow-window. Gwendoline could not but be delighted with these surroundings, and grateful for the thoughtful care thus evidenced. She had passed on the whole a very pleasant morning. But it was something of a shock to her now to hear the decisive order, "All these may be given away."

Gwendoline said nothing, but her face protested eloquently. Lady Halcot gave her a careless glance, and continued, "The dress and bonnet that Miss Halcombe travelled in will do until she has others. These shoes can be made presentable with good rosettes, but really there is nothing else. You have the Halcot foot, I see, Gwendoline,—high-instepped. No evening dress, is there?"

"Mother said I ought to get one, but you

told me to come exactly as I was," said Gwendoline.

"Quite right," said Lady Halcot. "Spurrell, you may fetch the hats and bonnets to try on." Then when the maid was gone she repeated, "Quite right. I did not realize that you would not possess a single evening dress, but you did as I told you. That is simply what I expect, and what I shall expect."

The tone was not hard, but it lacked tenderness. Lady Halcot stood near the bed, a little shrunken figure, scarcely up to Gwendoline's shoulder, yet with an indefinable air of dignity and command about her small person. Gwendoline debated quickly in her mind what to say, and ended by saying nothing.

"That is what I expect of you," repeated Lady Halcot gravely. "Precisely the same implicit obedience that I would expect from a child of my own."

"I should be very sorry to go against your will in anything," Gwendoline said, her voice trembling. "I will try to please you, indeed."

"Yes. I believe you are a good girl. If I had not thought so, I should not have been so ready to adopt you."

"A good girl," in Lady Halcot's phraseology, meant "a girl who will do as she is bid." Gwendoline understood it so.

Lady Halcot turned as Spurrell re-entered, having an arm-full of bonnet-boxes. "I had these sent in readiness," she said. "There is a pretty chip hat with an ostrich feather, which I believe will become you very well, Gwendoline. Spurrell will find it immediately. I am not so sure about the bonnets. You must try them on. The dressmaker will be here in an hour to take orders. I should wish you to have two evening dresses, one of a soft blue material, which will suit you nicely, and another of white trimmed with pink. The blue will be for home evening wear, ordinarily. I had some idea of a black velvet and crimson walking-costume, but it is becoming too warm. I have chosen a pretty brown stuff for every-day wear, and you must have jacket and hat to match. The second walking-dress I have not yet decided on, but I am rather thinking of gray,—silk and other material mixed. When you are thoroughly well set up, I shall consider about giving you an allowance, but it is better that you should first learn something of my tastes. That is the hat, Spurrell. Put it on. Now look at yourself in the glass, Gwendoline. My foresight has proved true, I think. How do you like it?"

"It is very pretty, thank you," Gwendoline said in a low voice.

"We will decide upon that, without hesitation.

I don't like these bonnets, Spurrell. I fancied there were others."

"I may have overlooked a box, my lady. I will go and see."

Lady Halcot moved towards the bed. "Your little writing-case and work-bag are very shabby, Gwendoline. I will supply you with fresh ones immediately, and these can be sent away."

Gwendoline was startled. "If you please, may I not keep them?" she asked. "I have had them so long."

"That is the very thing. They are worn out."

"But, Lady Halcot, my mother gave me the writing-case, and Ruth made the bag. May I keep them, please?"

"No," Lady Halcot said quietly, and she took both into her own hands.

"I will put them out of sight," pleaded Gwendoline.

Lady Halcot looked steadily at her, and repeated—"No."

"But they are mine!"

"That may be. And you are mine now."

Gwendoline had a hard struggle. Not sorrow only, but passion too rose high, for this seemed to her unnecessary and tyrannical. The cry of "Oh, help me, help me!" went up from her heart, and help came. Lady Halcot watching saw the flush subside, and the face grow calm.

"Well?" she said.

"It must be as you wish," said Gwendoline, in a low voice. "One moment—please."

Lady Halcot yielded both into Gwendoline's outstretched hands. She would not have done so ordinarily. Gwendoline held them lovingly, pressed them to her lips, and then gave them back to Lady Halcot—two bright drops having fallen on the rubbed leather of the case.

"You are a silly child," Lady Halcot said, not in a tone of displeasure. She left the room, and returned almost immediately, bearing a silk-lined work-basket and a beautiful little Russian leather writing-case, both furnished with silver and polished steel fittings.

"These were already waiting for you," she said.

Gwendoline received them with mingled pain and pleasure, touched, yet not quite comforted.

CHAPTER XIII.

TO AND ABOUT HONORA.

“THE LEYS, *Thursday*.

“MY own dear Honor: Just a week since I came—and it seems like three months at least!

“I would not write sooner. It seemed better to wait, and not to give you mere first impressions too hastily. Mother promised to let you hear of my safe arrival. Lady Halcot has given me leave to write home regularly once a week; and I suppose this is as much as I could expect under the circumstances. Nothing has been said yet about correspondence with friends. I do not know if I am to expect restrictions there.

“My new—residence—I cannot quite call it ‘home’ yet—is very beautiful, Honor. How you would delight in the garden and conservatories! Sometimes the whole seems like a dream to me, and I find myself expecting to wake up in the dear old London house, and I do not quite know how to bear the pain of separation

—and then again it comes over me with a rush of joy that things will be so different there now. I had a letter from my mother this morning, and she says they feel quite rich. Of course my father has his full income until midsummer; and the first quarter from Lady Halcot's settlement had just come in; and, also dear father had heard of something for himself after midsummer, which will bring in enough to be a real additional help, though very far from enough for us all if I had stayed at home. I know all this is safe with you.

“So I have a great deal to make me happy and thankful, have I not?”

“Lady Halcot is very good and kind. She is not loving in manner like my own dear mother, and of course I miss that. But she has lavished gifts upon me—everything that I can possibly want in the way of clothes and knick-knacks. It seems quite wrong that so much should be spent on my single self. One of my new hats had a ticket hanging to it, and I saw 3*l*. 10*s*. [*\$*17.50] marked. I felt positively guilty, remembering all the home needs. Yet I dare not protest.

“Sometimes I think Lady Halcot is already growing fond of me. People show fondness very differently. She never kisses me except once coldly night and morning, and never puts on an affectionate manner; yet she shows constant

interest in everything that I do, and overlooks me incessantly. I have to get up exactly at half-past seven, and to be in bed precisely at half-past ten; and I am made to read one hour, to work another hour, to walk a third hour, as she thinks desirable; while if I am half-an-hour absent, without being sent away, she always inquires what I have been doing. She even chooses books for me, and prescribes the order in which I am to read them.

“This sort of supervision seems of course a little strange, after my London independence. The eldest of ten naturally learns to stand alone early; and I seem now to have gone suddenly into leading-strings. But I know it is all meant kindly; and I shall grow used to it in time.

“I have not seen much of Riversmouth yet. Lady Halcot sends me into the grounds for an hour every morning; but I do not go beyond them. She does not like me to walk about alone; and I don't think she quite understands my love for the shore, or the delight that a wander there has for a Londoner. In the afternoon we either go out in the pony-carriage, or else we have a state-drive in the large carriage, paying calls, and sometimes seeing very pretty gardens and pleasant people. She introduces me everywhere as ‘my young cousin,’ occasionally adding, ‘and adopted child;’ so I am most kindly received.

“I must confess I do sometimes long to jump out of our stately chariot, and to have a good scramble up the banks and over the fields! But I try not to give way to such feelings. Yesterday we passed a lovely bank of wild-flowers, and I could not help exclaiming. Lady Halcot asked if I wanted some, and she actually had the carriage stopped, and made the footman gather me a hand-full. It was nice to have them, only of course not quite like getting them for myself.

“Is it not strange that I should have so often thirsted for a life of more freedom, with plenty of room, and plenty of air, and plenty of money, and absence of noise and crowd, and not to feel always obliged to toil on, whatever my mood might be, and now these have all come to me, and yet they are not freedom! My London life was a life of greater liberty.

“You would not let me say, Honor dear, that God had taken me at my word and sent me my will in displeasure. I must need to learn some lesson from all this. I have been looking out in my Bible, the last morning or two, all about the different murmurings and complainings of the children of Israel; and it does seem to me as if there was almost no sin of which they were so often guilty, or which had to be more sharply punished. One is apt to think that grumbling at little things in every-day life

is a small matter, but I am sure it is not a small sin in God's sight. I am praying hard now for the great gift of a contented spirit, and you must pray for it with me, Honor,—for myself, I mean. I know now that God can see exactly what is best for me, and I do not want to have any longer even a wish to choose for myself. He can tell exactly the discipline that I need; and I would not, if I could, lift a finger to keep it off. I have found out more this week of my own pride and wilfulness than I ever found out before, and yet I have been very happy the last two or three days, in the thought that he is training me, and that he loves me too well to let any foolish shrinking on my part hinder the training. And I want not even to shrink, I want to have those things sent which will draw me nearer and nearer to Christ.

“Forgive all this talk about self. It is only what I would say if we were together. I cannot write so freely to anybody else. Mother would be distressed, fancying me unhappy; but you will understand exactly what I mean.

“I had a real treat this morning. Lady Halcot took me in the pony-carriage to the Phillips' cottage, to see little Arthur. He is looking quite rosy and well, and his sister is such a nice respectable girl, very lame, but a capital needlewoman. Lady Halcot has prom-

ised to give her some work, and she has given me leave to pay for little Arthur's schooling. I am to have *such* an allowance for my clothes,—it quite frightens me.

“I should have liked to kiss the dear little boy as he came creeping up close to me—his sister saying, ‘Artie’s always talking about you, miss, and how you saved his life’—but I did not quite dare, with Lady Halcot sitting there. She is kind to the poor on her estate, but she never unbends in manner.

“I must not forget to tell you that I have received a medal from the Humane Society—partly Mr. Fosbrook’s doing, I suspect. He came in yesterday and was very pleasant; but he said something to Lady Halcot about my not looking strong, and directly he was gone she desired me to go to my room and lie down for an hour. So you see your Gwen is well taken care of.

“Not a word so far about Miss Withers, the companion. The truth is I am rather at a loss what to say. She is a sort of neutral-tinted individual, with an air of humble politeness and an apparent forgetfulness of her own existence, which, if genuine, would be—perhaps I ought to be able to say is—positively beautiful. Yet I do not like her; I cannot tell why. She seems invaluable to Lady Halcot. Sometimes I wish

she would not be quite so invaluable. I should so like to be useful to Lady Halcot, but not a loophole is left to me. Watch as I may for opportunities, Miss Withers invariably glides in between and does what is needed. I have an instinct—perhaps only a fancy—that she dislikes me, notwithstanding her cordiality. Her nephew is Lady Halcot's secretary, about as fit for the post as our little Bob. I do pity him.

“Only think ; I have not touched my painting all this week. The packing-case is not even opened. An odd sort of laziness has taken possession of me, and steady work seems impossible. I must try to get out of this.

“I am writing to you in my own boudoir, a lovely little room, fit for a princess. You would not know your Gwen here! Yet I do not feel that I myself am different. It is only the surroundings that are changed, the same stone in a fresh setting. Will it be so when we get to heaven, Honor? our very same selves, actually and consciously, only with all the evil that is in us utterly gone, and with radiant new surroundings! What a beautiful thought, if one follows it out!”

A slight rustle made Gwendoline raise her eyes, and she involuntarily stood up. Lady Halcot had entered the room, unperceived.

"You seem very much absorbed," her ladyship said.

"I am only writing to a friend," Gwendoline answered, not without an inward tremor. Would Lady Halcot demand to see the letter? She wished she had not written so freely.

"To what friend?"

"Honora Dewhurst."

Lady Halcot waited for more, her little crooked figure in black velvet standing motionless in the middle of the room, and her black eyes requesting information.

"She was a fellow-student of mine in London, an artist," said Gwendoline. "We worked side by side very often. I have known her for years, and she is my dearest friend. She is an orphan and quite alone in the world, and she is—oh, so good. I never knew anybody like Honor."

The black eyes did not stir from Gwendoline's face. Lady Halcot was never guilty of staring; but her power of gazing steadily, without a blink, was remarkable.

"A young person?" she asked, with a stress on the adjective.

"Honor is four or five years older than I am."

"A lady in mind and manners?"

"Oh, quite—quite," said Gwendoline.

"And in family?"

"I believe her father was of a very good fam-

ily. I never asked her much about that. And her mother too—only one of her mother's sisters married a tradesman," Gwendoline hesitated a moment, flushing brightly. "I ought to tell you that the aunt lives in Riversmouth, with her husband. Honor and I came down together to see them."

Lady Halcot's face showed a mixture of gratification and dissatisfaction. "You are thoroughly honest, I see," she said. "Then you are acquainted with these people."

"With Mr. and Mrs. Widrington,—yes."

"The acquaintance cannot be continued, in your present position."

"Honor told me that it would be so," said Gwendoline in a low voice. "But may I—please may I write to Honor? She is my oldest and dearest friend."

The moment's pause was terrible to Gwendoline. When the answer came,—“Yes, in moderation; if I find no cause later to rescind this permission.”

“Thank you,” was all Gwendoline could say. Her limbs shook with agitation.

“Had you acted towards me with less transparent openness, my decision might have been different. As it is, you may write occasionally, once a month or so.”

Gwendoline murmured her thanks anew.

"I see you intend to conform to my wishes in these matters," Lady Halcot continued, in her calmly impassive manner. "This is precisely what I have desired, and I am extremely pleased with you, Gwendoline. You are a very pretty girl; your manners are thoroughly ladylike; and you have thus far shown yourself entirely submissive. Continue as you have begun, and I shall have no fault to find with you."

Gwendoline broke out suddenly with unpremeditated words. "I can't thank you for all your kindness, Lady Halcot. I wish I could."

"There is no need. Gratitude is best shown in the conduct."

"If only I could feel that I was of any use," half-whispered Gwendoline. "If I could be any help or comfort to you! My mother did so wish—"

Lady Halcot's glance was checking. "It is a pleasure to me to have you in the house," she said. "That should be sufficient. I do not forbid you to speak of your mother, Gwendoline, but the less frequently you do so the better."

Gwendoline's cheeks were crimson, and her eyes overflowed. "If you did but know my mother now!" she said almost passionately. "Such a mother she has been to us! Oh, Lady Halcot, if you could but forgive—could but feel as you once did—"

"The two things are not synonymous," said Lady Halcot. "I have long forgiven Eleanor Halcombe, but I certainly do not feel towards her as I once did. That is enough on the subject. I wish you now to show me your paintings. You have brought some specimens, I hope, as I desired you to do."

"The packing-case is down-stairs. It has not been opened yet," Gwendoline said huskily.

"We will send for it. Ring the bell."

Gwendoline obeyed, and before long she was kneeling on the floor, tenderly lifting out one after another of her later studies and sketches. Memories of the life which lay behind thronged upon her. Lady Halcot stood near, with an air of keen interest, receiving each in turn from Gwendoline's hands, placing it in a good position, examining, criticizing minor points, but as yet giving no general verdict. Gwendoline knew that the verdict would be one of weight when it did come. Lady Halcot was a connoisseur of no common order.

"These are all I have brought," Gwendoline said at length.

Lady Halcot stood gazing still. "That head is very carefully executed," she said. "You are painstaking, I perceive. But there is not a second study of the kind. You seem to have done most in the way of landscapes."

"I never thought I had any gift for heads."

Lady Halcot went over the whole set again, plainly making up her mind as to their merits, with an air of quiet competence.

"Stay—I see one more in the bottom of the box. You have overlooked it. Yes, that is the best of all—by far the best. There is a vigor of outline here, and a force of coloring, which I miss in the rest. It will be worth your while to continue painting as something more than a mere pastime. I began to have doubts on that head."

Gwendoline hardly knew whether pleasure or pain weighed heaviest. She said simply, "That is not mine. It is Honora Dewhurst's."

"Indeed. She has unusual artistic power."

"I always knew her pictures to be better than mine," said Gwendoline.

"It is not merely a question of their being 'better.' That, in a sense, one would expect from her age, and her longer practice. This picture bears the stamp of genius—not merely of talent. Your sketches are very pretty, and they do great credit to your perseverance. Painting will be a pleasant occupation and a graceful accomplishment, in your present sphere. But you could never have made your livelihood as an artist."

Possibly Lady Halcot found more satisfaction in this thought than Gwendoline did.

"And you think Honora may?" asked Gwendoline.

"I do not say she will ever find herself in the first rank of living artists; time alone can decide that. But, undoubtedly, she has a gift worth cultivating to the utmost of her opportunity, a gift by which she may make her way. Are you disappointed, Gwendoline?"

Gwendoline was looking strangely pale, but she tried to smile. "I ought to be thankful it is Honor, and not I—"

"Why?"

"She needs it most—now."

"True, but do not misunderstand me. I have no wish to discourage your efforts. You have a marked talent for painting, and it is a talent which ought not to be neglected. All I say is, that I do not find tokens of original genius."

"Not in mine, but in Honor's."

"Yes, there is that difference," said Lady Halcot, looking rather curiously at Gwendoline. "Would it be a pleasure to you to request Miss Dewhurst to paint me a picture to order? I am willing to give twenty guineas for it."

"O thank you, how kind!"

"You may keep your letter open till to-morrow, and I will consider what subject I should prefer. I think—" Lady Halcot paused, and

then asked again, "Are you very much disappointed?"

"I ought not to be."

"Why 'ought not?'"

"It was conceited of me to expect anything else. And nobody ought to wish for genius, where God has not given it."

"I am not so sure about that," Lady Halcot said. "I am sorry for your disappointment, Gwendoline; but you are not one to wish for other than an honest opinion, even if I were capable of giving any other."

"O no, indeed," said Gwendoline. "It is just what I have wished to have, for years past, from some one who did really know."

"Have your paintings never been seen by a competent critic?"

Gwendoline moved her head negatively. "I have had a great many kind things said to me, by fellow-students and others," she said. "I never knew how much it was all worth."

"Miss Dewhurst's estimate ought to be worth something."

"She is my friend," said Gwendoline, simply, and Lady Halcot's face relaxed into a smile.

"You show some knowledge of human nature," she said. "But that biasing of one's opinion by one's affection is to me a thing inconceivable—for myself. My judgment would

be altogether the same in the case of friend or foe. It is a matter apart from personal feeling."

"With you, but not with most people," Gwendoline said.

"I believe you are right. Nearly half-past four. We will go down and have our tea."

"In a few minutes—if you please—"

"Very well—you will follow me when you are ready."

Lady Halcot disappeared, and Gwendoline went slowly into her bed-room, feeling strangely weary, as if all life and power had died out of her. She rejoiced for Honor, and she did not for a moment question the justness of the sentence passed, but this only made pain the more acute. It was the fading of many bright girlish dreams. Gwendoline knelt beside the bed, and hid her face, a deep cloud weighing her down. She was given to such moods, but she had seldom known a darker hour than this.

Everything seemed going from her—all the dear old life, with its trials and hopes, its toils and aspirations. What had she now to live for? Was it to be with her thenceforward a mere dead-level of self-satisfying, an easy existence, without work for others, without high hopes for the future, without consolation, except in the knowledge that by her presence at the Leys she was indirectly keeping the home-circle in comfort?

"What had she now to live for?" Simply, as before, to carry out the will of her God in whatever sphere she might be placed!

"Without high hopes for the future!" But what of the glorious future beyond and above the present life, where all her highest hopes were centered? That remained untouched.

These thoughts came first, followed by a recollection of her late struggles for submission. Here was a new test. If this were the will of God, should it not be her will also? Who and what was Gwendoline Halcombe, to chafe and fret because he had not seen fit to endow her with great gifts? Whatever her gifts might be, she had but to lay them at her Master's feet. Whatever her appointed manner of life, she had still to honor his Name. What need for other and more selfish aims?

How time passed Gwendoline did not know. She forgot all about Lady Halcot and afternoon tea. Victory came to her slowly, and calmness with it; but the battle following upon sharp disappointment had been exhausting. A sense of nerveless languor seemed to enchain her faculties, and she knelt on still, from sheer lack of energy to rise. Kneeling thus she fell heavily asleep.

A hand on her shoulder broke into a dream of old days. Gwendoline sprang up from her

crouching posture, with a startled exclamation of—"Mother!"

"Gwendoline!" said Lady Halcot, in astonishment.

Gwendoline was for a moment utterly dazed and colorless. She stood silently, gathering up her scattered recollections.

"What made you go to sleep?" inquired Lady Halcot.

"Was I asleep?" Gwendoline asked in reply.

"Yes. Sit down there," said Lady Halcot, motioning her to the sofa. "Miss Withers knocked at your door, and could obtain no answer."

"I am so sorry you have had trouble," murmured Gwendoline, not yet quite coherently.

Lady Halcot stood looking, with her manner of unimpassioned interest.

"I'll come down now. Please do not let me keep you," said Gwendoline anxiously.

"No. Stay where you are. Your tea shall be brought to you."

Lady Halcot moved away, and Gwendoline was glad to rest her head among the cushions. By the time Spurrell and a little tray appeared, she had regained her collectedness, but to Gwendoline's amazement Spurrell did not appear alone, for Lady Halcot swept in before her.

"Do not talk. Take the tea," said Lady

Halcot, when Gwendoline would have protested. "You may leave the tray, Spurrell." And presently, as Gwendoline set down the emptied cup, she asked with some abruptness, "Do you say your prayers in the middle of the day?"

Gwendoline blushed vividly. "Sometimes," she said in a low voice.

"Then that is what you were doing."

Gwendoline's brown eyes had their pleading look. "I don't think I was exactly saying any prayers," she answered gently. "I only felt as if I wanted help."

"Help?" repeated Lady Halcot.

"I could not feel rightly. It was not right to be discontented and unhappy, because of what you said. I wanted to be perfectly willing to have whatever God might will for me."

"I see no particular objection to your manner of expressing yourself," said Lady Halcot, after a pause, as if for consideration. "But I have a very strong dislike to infatuation on religious subjects. I hope you will keep clear of it."

"I hope so," was the best answer Gwendoline could think of.

"Your tea has done you good, but you are pale still, Gwendoline. I should like you to rest on your sofa for half an hour. Then you may come down."

Gwendoline submitted unquestioningly, and

at the end of the half-hour descended to the drawing-room, white-cheeked and spiritless still.

She was no better next day. The weariness which had seized upon her that afternoon continued, and Gwendoline fought with it in vain. There were no signs of discontent about her; but the brown eyes had grown languid and the cheeks colorless, and interest in life seemed to have forsaken her. She was submissive and grateful, but her face rarely lighted up with its old flashes of brilliancy. Lady Halcot tried to recall her to painting; and the effort was a failure. If she walked in the garden she had to lie down afterwards, and if she attempted to read she dropped asleep.

"This cannot be allowed to go on," Lady Halcot said one day to Miss Withers. "I must consult Mr. Fosbrook, if she does not mend soon."

"I do not imagine there is much amiss," that lady said mildly. "Except—possibly—a little home-sickness—quite natural—"

"I do not believe Miss Halcombe is home-sick," said Lady Halcot. But she did not like the suggestion, and she did not forget it.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ENCOUNTER.

I AM not ill, I assure you. There is nothing wrong with me. It is only a spirit of idleness," Gwendoline said, blushing.

"We must consider how the spirit of idleness can best be met," said Mr. Fosbrook, in his drily polite manner, glancing from Gwendoline to Lady Halcot. "I should not imagine idleness to be Miss Halcombe's usual failing."

"On the contrary she has an energetic temperament," said Lady Halcot. "But I do not think she is very strong just now."

"What are Miss Halcombe's favorite occupations, may I ask?" Mr. Fosbrook addressed the remark generally.

"Painting—has been," Gwendoline answered, as the elder lady remained silent.

"And is not now?"

"I can't take it up yet. I am idle," repeated Gwendoline.

"A little reaction, possibly, from too steady application in the past."

"That did not occur to me," said Lady Halcot.

"Don't try the painting at present. You will return to it with more zest by-and-by, if you give yourself a few weeks of thorough rest first. Are you fond of riding?"

"I have never been on horseback."

"And how about walks? I do not mean mere garden-strolls, but brisk country-walks and sea-shore rambles."

Gwendoline colored brightly, and Lady Halcot did not look quite pleased. "Miss Halcombe spends at least an hour in the grounds every morning; but walking seems rather to knock her up."

"I would not think too much of that. Let her take a sharp walk, and if necessary go to sleep afterwards for an hour. Perhaps a morning on the beach would be a pleasant change sometimes. Are you devoted to sea-anemones, Miss Halcombe?"

"I do not know much about them. I should like—" and she paused.

"I could lend you a little book on the subject." He had noted her expression of pleasure. "Merely as a guide to your own researches on the beach."

Lady Halcot counted all this beside the mark, and she intimated with dignity that Gwendoline's

presence was no longer required. Mr. Fosbrook stood up to shake hands, remarking, "You had better leave art alone for a while, and take to nature instead." Gwendoline went away, smiling, and the doctor had a somewhat lengthy interview with Lady Halcot. After his departure Gwendoline was recalled.

"Would you like to go to the shore this morning?"

Gwendoline's face said more than words in response.

"Mr. Fosbrook does not think there is much wrong with you, but he recommends sea-bathing and as much fresh air and exercise as possible. It is unfortunate that Miss Withers is such a poor walker. You cannot of course go alone into the country, but Mr. Fosbrook assures me that you will be perfectly safe upon the beach. He thinks you will enjoy yourself more alone, than if I sent Frith as your attendant. I am willing to try the experiment, trusting to your discretion. I need scarcely say that you will of course exchange words with no one. I have a great objection to the making of stray acquaintances."

Gwendoline did her best to put the old lady's mind at rest, and speedily started upon her solitary ramble, feeling like a caged bird set free. She had not passed an hour of such enjoyment for many a day. It was a sunny morning, and

the half high tide, as it came in, was dropping little lines of froth among the pebbles. Small green waves washed up and broke in quick succession; while the pale blue, further out, reflecting the sky, was varied by snatches of gray from passing clouds. Gwendoline paced to and fro restlessly happy. The sea never saddened her as it saddens some people, but it preached her a sermon that morning. The great ocean was so hard at work, climbing the little belt of shore, seeming to expend much energy on a small object, and gaining that object only to fall back beaten so soon as victory was obtained. Yet was it thus in reality? If in that hour its appointed work was done, its Maker's will was accomplished, could the object have been slight or the apparent failure real? "I think not," Gwendoline murmured half-aloud. "I suppose one ought to be willing and ready for anything, advance or retreat, conquest or defeat, no matter what, so long as God chooses it for us. I should like to feel so about my every day life,—to have my heart set on simply doing his will."

Lady Halcot counted her experiment successful, when Gwendoline returned, fresh and hungry, from her ramble. "Mr. Fosbrook is right," she said. "We must follow his advice." And during several successive mornings the same plan was pursued.

Gwendoline had taken with her one day a little volume of poetry, and was busily reading, seated on a low rock, the first of that same jutting series where her adventure with the little boy had taken place. Voices near made her turn her head mechanically.

Gwendoline sprang to her feet, as if from an electric shock. "Honor!" burst from her lips, and she was in Honora Dewhurst's arms.

The instant's impulse over, Gwendoline woke up to her position, and she stepped back, yet not before Honora was gravely putting her off.

"Oh, Honor, why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Why, Honor, if this isn't your pretty young friend, Miss Gwendoline Halcombe! How do you do, my dear?—how *do* you do? Allow me to congratulate you heartily on the rise in your circumstances. I hope her ladyship, Lady Halcot, is quite well."

Gwendoline stood still in blank dismay. She remembered Lady Halcot's prohibition,—yet what could she do? Mr. Widrington came near with outstretched arm and beaming face: and she slowly put her little hand into his. One shake did not satisfy Mr. Widrington. He moved her hand up and down energetically, renewing his congratulations, with an air of paternal encouragement.

"Quite a pleasure to see you again, Miss Halcombe,—I do assure you it is quite a pleasure. We haven't forgotten you in our little home,—no, no, my old wife and I we often talk of you, and she used to think at first you'd maybe drop in some day, and have a cup of tea with us. But I said to her, 'No, no, wife,' says I, 'Miss Halcombe's a grand young woman now, in a sphere above us, and depend on it she's got other fish to fry, so we needn't look to see her in our humble dwelling! And sure enough we didn't. Not as I'm offended, so don't you think it, Miss Halcombe. But I'm not sorry for this opportunity to congratulate you on your prospects, and I'm sure you'll accept the congratulations as meant."

Honora, who had been studying Gwendoline's face, spoke suddenly: "Gwen, is this permitted?"

Gwendoline's lips scarcely formed the monosyllable,—“No.”

“There, we will say good-bye at once.”

“Oh, Honor, let me have a few words, just a few words with you,” Gwendoline said pleadingly. “I don't think she would mind that, really.”

“I understand.” Honora considered for a moment, then turned to her uncle,—“Would you mind leaving us together for two or three

minutes?" she asked. "Miss Halcombe must not stay, and we have not met for so long."

"To be sure, my dear, to be sure; it's a true saying that three is no company. I'll make for the cliff, and wait your leisure, and don't you hurry yourselves on any account. Women always have plenty to say to one another. I don't mind if I'm an hour waiting."

"Kind old man!" Gwendoline murmured, as after another vigorous hand-shake he withdrew.

"Now, Gwen, tell me what is permitted?"

"I may correspond with you, and that of course means that you are acknowledged as my friend. I do not think Lady Halcot would mind my meeting you, here or elsewhere."

"I see. She would tolerate me as an artist. But you are not to meet my uncle as an acquaintance."

Another soft "No" was the answer.

"It has been spoken about."

"I told her all at first. I thought it right. And she said—*that* must stop."

"The other must stop too," said Honora quietly.

Gwendoline gave only a look.

"I do not mean that the correspondence must stop, or the friendship, my darling. But when I am staying with my uncle, I cannot have differences made that would pain him. If you must

pass him without notice, you must pass me too. Your meeting him occasionally is unavoidable, especially now you are allowed to go about more alone. I shall tell him simply what he has to expect, and that it is by Lady Halcot's desire; and if I put myself in the same category with himself he will not be hurt. Gwen, don't sob!"

"O Honor!—if I could but go home!"

"Hush, you must not wish that. For your mother's sake, Gwennie dear, don't wish it. Think how comfortable and easy they all are now, in comparison with the past. And you are happy at the Leys, are you not?"

"I suppose so," Gwendoline could hardly utter.

"Don't cry, Gwen,—you make me feel myself so cruel. Yet surely you see with me that I cannot act differently."

"I don't know. I think I only see my own side of the matter," said Gwendoline, with a tearful smile. "I do try to be brave, but sometimes I have such a heart-thirst for you and mother. Lady Halcot is very kind, but nobody loves me here, Honor, and nothing seems really worth doing. Miss Withers does everything for Lady Halcot, and I never have a chance of being useful in that direction. Lady Halcot won't hear of my taking a class in the Sunday-school; and if

I propose to work for the poor, she says I may give orders to my maid to do anything I like. And though I have a large allowance, she expects me to spend so much upon myself, and overlooks the spending so closely, that I cannot give away much. What am I to do, Honor? I know you won't say anything of all this to mother, but I have been longing to ask somebody, and I have no friend here. What ought I to do?"

Honora looked very tenderly into the sweet face, with its brimming sorrowful eyes. "It is not so very hard a question to answer, my darling," she said. "Just do what your Master gives you to do."

"But, Honor, he gives me nothing."

"Then be content to do that."

"Nothing!"

"Certainly, if such is his will for you just now. A master is entirely at liberty to bid his servant stand with folded hands for an hour, if so he please."

Gwendoline looked dreamily towards the horizon.

"Yes," she said, "of course he is. And the servant ought to obey without grumbling."

"Unquestionably."

"But doesn't it seem a waste of time? So much needs to be done."

"The seeming is not reality. God knows the need better than you or I can do. Perhaps you are being prepared for some work, which you would never be able to undertake without some such previous testing of your will as this."

"But if it lasts a long time?"

"It will not last longer than is good for you."

There was a brief pause, and Honora said gently, "Gwen, we must part."

"Just five minutes more."

Honora yielded, and the five minutes grew into ten, of low-voiced conversation. After that, she would consent to no longer delay. Gwendoline stood like a statue on the beach, watching her friend rejoin Mr. Widrington on the cliff, watching still until the two disappeared. Then with a full heart, yet cheered and comforted, she made her way homewards.

Leisure for thought came now, and a sense of fear crept over her. What would Lady Halcot say? Had she acted wrongly?

One thing was clear. The whole truth would have to be told without delay, cost what it might. Gwendoline had no hesitation there.

Reaching the Leys, she was met in the hall by Miss Withers. "You have come back," that lady observed, with what struck Gwendoline as a singular expression.

"Yes," Gwendoline said simply. "Where is Lady Halcot?"

"Her ladyship is occupied, and desires not to be interrupted at present."

There was nothing remarkable in this. Gwendoline passed on silently to her own room, and there indulged in so absorbing a dream of home-faces and home-news, that she lost count of time, and the luncheon bell rang unexpectedly. Gwendoline hastened down-stairs, regretting that she had not made an effort to see Lady Halcot. It was too late now.

Luncheon proved to be a silent meal that day. Lady Halcot's nose and mouth wore their most rigid look, Conrad Withers seemed conscious and uncomfortable, and Miss Withers bore an aspect of humble satisfaction. Gwendoline became conscious of something unusual in the atmosphere. Whether or no this something unusual were connected with herself she wisely resolved to be prompt in what she had to do.

"You have all finished?" Lady Halcot said at length, glancing round and rising. Other words were on her lips, but Gwendoline forestalled them.

"May I speak to you alone, if you please?"

"Certainly," Lady Halcot said, casting a swift glance at the girl's pale face. She did not see how another face in the room fell, but led the

way to her own boudoir, and placed herself in her favorite armchair. Gwendoline stood near, trembling slightly, but resolutely calm.

"Miss Withers said you were engaged when I came in, or I would have told you sooner. I have seen my friend, Honora Dewhurst."

"Where?" asked Lady Halcot.

"On the beach. She is staying for a night or two with her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Widrington, and she came there with her uncle. I was taken by surprise, and I did not know what to do. He and I shook hands."

"That 'did not know what to do' is not quite ingenuous, Gwendoline," said Lady Halcot coldly. "You could scarcely have forgotten my desire."

"No, but—with Honor there—I did not know how, indeed," said Gwendoline, in distress. "I could not refuse to notice him."

"Certainly you could. I expect you to do so in future."

Gwendoline thought of a dozen different things to say, and said none of them.

"Your only excuse is that you were, as you say, taken by surprise. But it must not happen again. The Widringtons are not to be received as acquaintances in any sense by you. Have you told me all?"

Gwendoline considered painfully, finding some

difficulty in commanding her thoughts, with those stern bright eyes upon her.

"Honor asked if it was allowed, and I said 'No;' and she asked him to leave us. I thought you would not mind my talking to Honor herself for a few minutes."

"Only a few minutes?"

"I don't think it could have been more than a quarter of an hour, but I cannot be sure. She was telling me about all of them at home, and the time went very fast."

"Did you talk of nothing else?"

Gwendoline blushed vividly. "Yes—I was telling her I wished I could be of more use to—to somebody—to people."

"You are of use to me. That ought to be sufficient. Have you told me all?"

"Not quite. I am afraid I kissed Honora at the first moment more warmly than you would have liked. But it was so sudden."

"I do not approve of school-girlish ecstasies, especially in public. But I have not had to complain of your manner before."

"You shall not again, if I can help it," said Gwendoline quietly.

"And about the Widringtons? That has to be put an end to, decisively. Either you must not meet them, or you must make them understand your respective positions."

"I think I had better not go on the shore again at present."

"Mr. Fosbrook wishes you to bathe."

"Yes, twice a week. I can manage that safely by going early,—but I will not sit about on the shore again. I do not want to give pain unnecessarily."

"Very well," Lady Halcot said, and she sat looking at Gwendoline thoughtfully.

"You need not stand," she remarked. "Gwendoline, it is well that you have acted with openness. I had already heard of this interview."

Gwendoline's astonishment was unmistakable.

"It does not matter how,—still I have no objection to your knowing. Mr. Withers was on the cliff during the early part of the affair, and on arrival here he naturally told his aunt what he had seen. Miss Withers felt it her duty to inform me. It is well therefore that you have been frank. If you had kept back any particulars, my trust in you would have suffered. The only complaint I have now to make is of your want of presence of mind. There was plainly no deliberate intention to disobey."

"I hope there never will be," Gwendoline said in a low voice, smothering with difficulty a sharp sense of indignation at Miss Withers' conduct.

"It would have been singular," Lady Halcot

said in a musing tone, unusual with her,—“singular if to-day of all days, I had found cause to think less well of you. You do not understand me, of course, and there is no need that you should. Still it is well that you should see clearly the relations in which we stand to one another. By certain alterations made in my will, and completed this very morning, you are made heiress to the greater part of that property which lies at my own disposal,—not the Halcot estate, but that which came to me from my mother. Unless you give me reason to revoke this step, you will some day be a tolerably rich woman.”

Gwendoline showed no excitement, as the old lady expected her to do. She received the news in absolute silence, and after some serious thought she said simply, “I hope that if I ever am rich I shall use my money rightly.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“No, I ought to thank you,” said Gwendoline. “And I do, indeed I do. Only I wish—”

“You wish what?”

“That it could be left to my mother instead of to me.”

“There is no need to enter upon that question,” said Lady Halcot, with less displeasure than she would have shown some weeks earlier. “Your mother took her deliberate choice, and

she must abide by it. I do not wish this matter talked about, remember."

"No," replied Gwendoline, "I will be very careful, and of course you might change your mind again. Shall I tell my mother, or would you rather not?"

"I leave that to your discretion."

"Did Mr. Selwyn come?" asked Gwendoline suddenly.

"To Riversmouth?—To-day? No, I wished it, but he was unable. Had he done so, I should have remembered that he was an old acquaintance of yours. Now you may dress for our drive."

Gwendoline understood that no more was to be said, and she moved away, outwardly quiet, but inwardly much stirred. As she passed along the corridor leading to her room, Conrad Withers suddenly darted towards her from some unknown corner, and brought himself to an abrupt pause.

"Miss Halcombe—Miss Halcombe! Just one word, I entreat of you! The old lady has let the cat out of the bag. I knew she would. I see it in your face. Can you ever forgive me?"

Gwendoline stood still, and gravely scrutinized his perturbed face. "How much have I to forgive?" she asked.

"I assure you I didn't mean any harm, but I'm a most unlucky fellow—always putting my

foot in it. I saw you were awfully delighted to get hold of the young lady, and it made me laugh to see old Widrington sawing your hand up and down and speechifying. I just told my aunt out of fun, and never dreamed of anything else, till I saw she took it as a serious matter. I assure you I didn't mean any harm."

"It was nothing worse than a little gossip on your part," said Gwendoline.

"Well, you see it's so tremendously dull here. If I didn't have a bit of fun sometimes I should die of the dumps, I do believe. But you'll forgive me, won't you?"

"There has been no harm done," said Gwendoline, with a certain quiet dignity which Conrad thought fascinating. "But there might have been. Another time I shall feel much obliged to you and your aunt if you will leave me to make my own explanations. Miss Withers may be perfectly sure that Lady Halcot will not fail to hear everything from me. Perhaps you will kindly say this to your aunt."

"I'll see that she understands. And I'll bite off my tongue before ever I tell her anything about you again," said Conrad.

"Stay," Gwendoline said as he made a move. "When did Miss Withers tell her story to Lady Halcot?"

"Oh, she just kept watch outside the door,

till the lawyer's man—Mr. what do you call him?—was gone, and then she went in, and never left Lady Halcot till the luncheon-bell rang. I knew what it meant, the moment I saw the old lady's face; and wasn't I mad with myself? Hallo! there she comes! I must be off, or I shall catch it!"—and Conrad sped past Lady Halcot, receiving a sharp glance of questioning as he went.

CHAPTER XV.

CLOUDS.

A YEAR had gone its round, spring yielding to summer, summer fading into autumn, autumn giving place to winter, winter once more budding into spring.

Gwendoline lived still at the Leys, and had lived there through all these months, with only one slight break of a fortnight at Malvern with Lady Halcot. The old lady rarely cared now to leave Riversmouth.

Sometimes Gwendoline found it difficult to believe that only one year had passed, since she was banished from her home. The time seemed interminable to look back upon; and the busy, happy London life appeared to lie indefinitely far behind. Gwendoline wondered often how she could ever have murmured at the surroundings of that dear life: the troubles in it seemed so small to her now, the happiness so great. She did so thirst to be again in an atmosphere of loving kindness, away from all this cold grandeur. Strange to say, Gwendoline had found no friends

in Riversmouth. Lady Halcot kept everybody at a distance. Mr. Fosbrook had made one attempt to advance acquaintanceship between Gwendoline and his sister-housekeeper; but Lady Halcot did not like Miss Fosbrook, and she gave him so decided a snubbing that the offence could hardly be repeated. Gwendoline stood entirely alone.

The Halcombes had not quitted their old home, though Mr. Halcombe's present clerkship, bringing in about 150*l.* per annum, lay at an inconvenient distance. The said clerkship, together with Lady Halcot's settlement, and Victor's lately increased pay, tended to keep them all in greater comfort. Two or three of the boys had been sent to a boarding-school, which lessened the amount of home-work. Gwendoline knew that her parents' cares were much lightened. Sometimes she and her mother exchanged by post some words of sorrowful longing, but generally each wrote cheerily for the other's sake, suppressing any mention of troubles, and neither, perhaps, quite knew how the other pined for a sight of her face.

Conrad Withers no longer filled the post of secretary to Lady Halcot. A grave and elderly man of greater competence gave her the assistance which of late she had increasingly needed. Conrad had taken it into his simple head to fall in

love with Gwendoline. Miss Withers did not exactly discourage him, but she counselled patience, not without secret hopes of bringing the matter to pass. Gwendoline, as Lady Halcot's adopted child, was distasteful to her; but Gwendoline, the probable heiress, as Conrad's *fiancée*, would have been quite another thing.

Miss Withers overestimated, in some degree, her own influence with the old lady; for probably nothing would ever have induced Lady Halcot to consent to such an engagement, had Gwendoline herself become willing; and she also overestimated Conrad's powers of self-command. The gradual and subtle working out of plans which suited Miss Withers was an impossibility to him. He endured a few weeks of delay, in deference to her wishes; then under a sudden impulse he precipitated matters by making a direct proposal.

Gwendoline, a good deal astonished at his boldness, refused him at once, kindly yet decisively. She passed some hours of painful hesitation as to her next step; and then followed her usual habit of telling Lady Halcot what had occurred.

The delay was unfortunate. Miss Withers, feeling convinced that Gwendoline would certainly speak, took her own measures, and made use of the interim. By some delicate manipu-

lation of the tale and a little additional coloring, she caused it to appear that the "poor silly boy," as she called him, had been the victim of Gwendoline's trifling, the helpless fly caught in the web of her attractions, and flung carelessly away so soon as Gwendoline had had her amusement.

Miss Withers' daily increasing influence over Lady Halcot, and Lady Halcot's own detestation of anything like flirting, caused this tale to carry weight. Gwendoline's own version of affairs following after, came too late to counteract the mischief. Lady Halcot was angry with everybody,—angry with Conrad for his temerity, angry with Miss Withers for not preventing the thing, doubly angry with Gwendoline, alike for her delay in speaking, and for her supposed conduct towards the unfortunate Conrad.

Conrad was dismissed from her employ on the spot, with a quarter's salary in advance, and a promise of recommendation to work elsewhere—"if he could find anything he was fit for," Lady Halcot grimly added. Miss Withers could not forgive Gwendoline this banishment of her nephew, for which poor Gwendoline was certainly not responsible. While enduring meekly her own share of Lady Halcot's annoyance, Miss Withers stealthily fanned into continued existence Lady Halcot's displeasure towards Gwendoline.

To Gwendoline, the change in Lady Halcot's bearing was an utter mystery. She was unable to imagine any reason why Conrad's foolish fancy should be visited upon her so heavily. Lady Halcot's air of cold vexation, persisted in week after week, was simply inexplicable. Sometimes she fancied she caught glimpses of strong dislike to herself, underlying Miss Withers' soft civility of manner, and she wondered whether the clue lay there; but again she would blame her own thoughts as unkind and suspicious, and would resolve to wait patiently for a lightening of the cloud. At times she felt strongly disposed to ask an explanation from Lady Halcot, and the step might have been a wise one. It was, however, impossible to tell how such a request would be received, and Gwendoline's courage failed. Her bright free spirit was growing positively timid, under the long pressure of her present life.

Matters had gone on thus during many weeks when one day Gwendoline received by post a short note from Conrad Withers. It ran as follows:—

“DEAR MISS HALCOMBE:—I have not any right to send you a letter, of course, but you'll forgive me this once. I want to say something to you, and that is—Mind you beware of my aunt. She is a good woman, I suppose, as good people go, at least she has been good to me and my sisters: but she

has claws beneath her velvet pads, and she hates you from the very bottom of her heart. Mind, if she can oust you from the Leys, she will! I think you ought to be warned, for you are too good to suspect anybody—a different sort of goodness from the other! I didn't mean to say so much when I began. Of course this is strictly in confidence. I depend on you not to say a word to anybody, for you'll get me into an awful mess if you do. But you must just keep your eyes open.

“Yours ever,

“C. WITHERS.”

Gwendoline read and re-read the scrawl in painful bewilderment. What should she do? How could she betray the poor's fellow's well-meant effort to warn her? Yet might she venture to keep his secret? Gwendoline was naturally impulsive, and an impulse seized upon her now. The letter had been brought to her room by a servant, and she did not know that it had lain for a few minutes in the hall, with some others by the same post, and that Miss Withers had inspected them. Conrad had endeavored to disguise his handwriting in the address; an abortive attempt so far as his aunt's eyes were concerned. Gwendoline, ignorant of this and hearing a footstep approaching, crumpled sheet and envelope together and flung them into the fire. The blackened edges were curling still, when Miss Withers entered, with some slight message from Lady Halcot; and they did not escape that lady's notice.

Miss Withers withdrew, leaving Gwendoline a prey to troubled thought. The deed was done, but the question was scarcely settled thereby. For many hours she was tossed to and fro in utter perplexity as to her right course. Inclination would have led her, for her own sake, to divulge the whole to Lady Halcot: but a fear of bringing trouble upon Conrad, and a conscientious shrinking from anything like betrayal of confidence, withheld her.

Days passed, and nothing was said. Gwendoline did not speak, neither did Lady Halcot. It was not Lady Halcot's fashion to ask an explanation which she expected, as her due, to come spontaneously.

Miss Withers had not failed to inform Lady Halcot of the arrival of the letter, adding to her information regrets as to "the poor boy's folly," and mild surmises that some encouragement from Gwendoline must have caused the deed. "I do not believe that," Lady Halcot said. "I have always found Miss Halcombe straightforward and obedient hitherto. Your nephew is by no means wanting in assurance, Miss Withers. I shall no doubt hear all from Miss Halcombe before night." But in a little while Lady Halcot did believe it—naturally perhaps, since Gwendoline said nothing.

So the cloud upon Gwendoline grew darker,

she herself unknowing why. She could not see the weaving of the web behind the scenes, could not tell how the gradual process of alienation was carried on, could not guess how her most unimportant remarks were detailed to Lady Halcot with new meanings of which she herself had never dreamt. She was conscious of a wall of separation growing up between herself and Lady Halcot, but the manner of its growth was a mystery to her. That Miss Withers had a hand in the matter she could no longer doubt. Conrad's letter supplied her with a clue thus far. It supplied her, however, with no means of circumventing the evil.

Gwendoline had never passed through a trial of this description before. Accustomed up to the time of leaving her London home to be petted, beloved, and sought after in her little circle of acquaintances, accustomed since coming to Riversmouth to be admired and trusted and made much of, it was an experience no less new than painful to find herself thrust out into the cold. The cessation of Lady Halcot's interest in her concerns revealed to her how much she had valued that interest. She was still looked after, told what to do, desired where to go, but the manner of the superintendence exercised was sharp and cold, as to a child in disgrace. Sometimes she wondered whether Lady Halcot were

growing tired of her, and would one day decide to send her home, and her heart sprang at the thought. But no hint of such an intention ever dropped from Lady Halcot's lips.

Gwendoline drooped under this icy atmosphere like a hot-house plant turned out into the frost. Without any definite ailment, she grew thin, pale and listless, and the days seemed to her to drag by interminably, lacking life and interest. She had nothing particular to do for any one except herself, and the mental energy necessary for steady self-improvement seemed of late to have died away. The weariness of long patience was upon her.

Yet she did not murmur, and she was patient still. Whatever results this time of trial might have in the end remained to be seen ; but its present effect was distinctly to draw her nearer to her God. In her lack of earthly friends, she clung the more closely to her Heavenly Friend. The unsatisfied thirst for earthly love made her drink more deeply of the river of Divine love. Even now, in the pain of her loneliness, Gwendoline knew that the pain was "good for her."

Mr. Selwyn came down to Riversmouth one spring day, by the old lady's request, to discuss certain matters divulged by her to nobody. The change in Gwendoline's position, and in Gwendoline herself, struck him forcibly. He had been

down several months earlier, just before the Conrad affair, and had seen Gwendoline well and happy, seemingly established as Lady Halcot's especial favorite. Lady Halcot had been giving her riding lessons, and had just presented her with a beautiful little horse. He well remembered Gwendoline's eager pleasure and gratitude, and her brilliant prettiness on horseback, together with Lady Halcot's evident satisfaction and pride in her. He had counted the whole arrangement a most happy success.

But this sunny May day, when he found himself once more in the old mansion of the Leys, he perceived at once a change. Gwendoline's wistful face, and subdued voice, as she met him, told their own tale. She could hardly speak for threatening tears, and she had to turn away lest others should see. At luncheon he noted with regret her constrained and even timid manner, together with Lady Halcot's cold and repressive bearing, nor did he fail to perceive the covert dislike and silken satisfaction of Miss Withers' air towards Gwendoline.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY HALCOT'S WILL.

“**I** WISH to have a codicil added to my will,” said Lady Halcot.

She spoke very decidedly after her wont, and sat upright in her chair, facing the lawyer, while the muscles round her mouth worked nervously.

“I have decided not to make Gwendoline Halcombe my heiress to the full extent that I purposed some months ago. Circumstances have occurred to alter my determination.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Selwyn said, not without a touch of surprise. Lady Halcot took umbrage at it immediately.

“I suppose I am at liberty to dispose of my property as I see fit,” she said sharply. “I am not under obligations to explain my reasons to all the world.”

“Certainly not. Certainly not,” Mr. Selwyn answered, with all politeness.

“I intend to leave the sum of thirty thousand

pounds for the building and endowing of a small hospital in Riversmouth; and also the sum of ten thousand pounds for the building of some almshouses. I did not realize till lately the need for these two institutions. Miss Withers has been drawing me some neat plans for the almshouses. She has quite a gift that way."

"Ha—that is it," thought the lawyer. "So *she* is at the bottom of the matter."

"Also I intend to leave the sum of four thousand pounds to Miss Withers."

"Miss Withers ought to be grateful," said Mr. Selwyn.

"Miss Withers is always grateful for kindnesses. I find her increasingly useful—a most devoted attendant. I am not so young as I was, and I do not know what I should do without her. It is my wish to mark my appreciation of her services. If I could depend upon others as entirely as I can depend upon her—"

The old lady's tone was combative, and the unfinished sentence plainly pointed to Gwendoline. The lawyer again said—"Certainly," in a soothing tone. Secretly he thought Lady Halcot nervous and irrational, as if something had thrown her off her balance. A pause followed, and he observed cautiously—"It is of course no concern of mine, but perhaps I should recall to your memory, Lady Halcot, that in a letter to



"Seventy thousand is a low estimate, if I am not mistaken." p. 185.

Miss Halcombe you undertook to provide handsomely for her future. There would not be much remaining to her after what you propose to do. Thirty thousand to the hospital; ten thousand to the almshouses; four thousand to Miss Withers: twenty thousand, roughly, in various bequests and legacies—out of some seventy thousand pounds.”

“Seventy thousand is a low estimate, if I am not mistaken. I promised to provide handsomely for Gwendoline Halcombe, if she gave me satisfaction,” Lady Halcot said, rather too much as if speaking of a housemaid. “But I have had reason of late to be disappointed in Miss Halcombe. She has shown a want of ingenuousness, a want of entire straightforwardness—with which it is impossible to be satisfied. And within only the last week she has displayed a want of propriety in her manner of speaking about me—not of course to my face, but behind my back—which I could never have expected in her.”

“I am surprised, I confess,” said Mr. Selwyn, while “Miss Withers again” flashed through his mind. “I should not have imagined the thing possible, knowing Miss Halcombe as I do. Is your ladyship sure that the information is completely reliable?”

“Completely,” Lady Halcot said with her most

decided air. "However, I am not in the habit of forgetting my promises, or of swerving without sufficient cause from my intentions. I intend to leave Miss Halcombe sufficiently provided for. Your suggestion was therefore superfluous."

Mr. Selwyn felt that he had given offence, and he bowed slightly with an air of apology.

"The five hundred a year, settled upon her parents for their lifetime, will revert to Miss Halcombe after their death. This is already so arranged; and the arrangement shall remain undisturbed. Also there will be at my death a few thousands to become hers immediately—some seven or eight thousand, if I am not mistaken. This is at least as much as I have ever pledged myself to do; although for a time I intended to go much further."

Mr. Selwyn found the old lady as usual keenly interested in business details. It struck him, however, that she was not so clear as she had once been. She forgot herself repeatedly, asked the same questions over again, and seemed not fully to grasp the sense of his answers. Still, her resolution was plainly taken.

The interview was a long one, leaving Mr. Selwyn barely time to catch his train. He would have liked a few words alone with Gwendoline; but to defer his return until a later hour was

not possible; and he learned that Gwendoline had gone out for a drive. Was it by her own wish? Mr. Selwyn shrewdly suspected that Gwendoline would have been at least as pleased as himself to exchange a few remarks.

"The upshot of the matter is that Miss Halcombe is unhappy at the Leys."

Mr. Selwyn had said little about his visit to Riversmouth, that same evening in the drawing-room; much less than he was wont to say. Isobel's questioning had proved almost fruitless: for her husband was of course an adept at fencing. Mortimer Selwyn had listened silently, drawing his own conclusions; and these conclusions took shape suddenly in the above remark.

"I have not said so," Mr. Selwyn cautiously answered.

"Not in words, precisely," said Mortimer. "Is she well, father?"

"I should say not thoroughly. She has lost her color."

"And her spirits?"

"I thought she looked rather depressed. But as I tell you, I had no opportunity of speaking with her."

"Is the old lady as fond of her as six months ago?" inquired Isobel.

Mr. Selwyn could have laughed. "Fondness" was not a word to apply to Lady Halcot, under any circumstances, and he said so.

"Call it anything you like, Stuart. You know what I mean. Does Lady Halcot care for Gwendoline Halcombe as much as ever, or has she begun to throw her overboard? You need not be afraid to speak. Mortimer and I are perfectly safe."

Thus pressed, Mr. Selwyn yielded in some measure. He said nothing about the proposed change in the will, but he spoke with regret of Gwendoline's altered look and of the old lady's seeming coldness.

"I'll tell you what it is," Isobel cried indignantly. "It is all that little wretch of a Miss Withers, and her stupid nephew."

"My dear! You are not acquainted with Miss Withers."

"Yes, I am,—through you,—quite as much as I am acquainted with Lady Halcot. Do you think I don't understand the expression of your face, when you mention Miss Withers' name? I have no doubt she is a most estimable person, in people's opinion generally, but she isn't in your opinion, Stuart. And I haven't the least grain of doubt that she is at the bottom of the mischief, and you haven't either."

Mr. Selwyn would not confirm or deny the

assertion. He said merely,—“You are too observant, Isobel, and you have a quick imagination. But remember, this must not go farther. Not a word must reach Gwendoline’s parents.”

“What!—you would leave that poor girl to pine away for want of a kind word!”

“I hope matters are not quite so bad. We have no business to interfere; and it would be positive cruelty to tell her parents, when nothing can be done. Gwendoline is bound to remain at the Leys, so long as Lady Halcot desires to keep her.”

Isobel fumed, but could not explain away the truth of the assertion. Later in the evening, when she had retired, Mortimer took the opportunity to say quietly,—“You consider seriously that no steps can be taken?”

“About Gwendoline? Certainly not. She is entirely in Lady Halcot’s hands. You and I have nothing to do with the matter.”

“I am not so sure that I have not.”

“Eh!” Mr. Selwyn said doubtfully, and Mortimer’s pleasant eyes met his.

“I do not know whether I shall ever marry, father. But this I know,—that if I do, Gwendoline will be my wife.”

Mr. Selwyn made a sound of regret and disapproval.

“I should wish you to understand so much.

I have had as yet no opportunity of endeavoring to win her."

"And you will not have," said Mr. Selwyn gravely.

"I should not wait long but for your position with Lady Halcot. As it is, I could take no step without your approval."

"The last step which I could approve would be your going to Riversmouth with such an aim," said Mr. Selwyn. "She is a good girl and a sweet girl, Mortimer, but she is utterly out of your reach at present. Lady Halcot has her own plans. I am sorry for you. Perhaps I should be right to mention to you in confidence that Gwendoline will not be so rich as many suppose."

"So much the better," Mortimer said quietly.

CHAPTER XVII.

RICH TOWARD GOD.

ONE June Sunday there came into the parish church a new preacher, never before seen within its precincts. A charity sermon was foretold for that morning, and Mr. Rossiter had summoned a clerical acquaintance from a distance. He did not very often indulge his congregation with variety in their spiritual fare. Charity sermons and strange preachers were contrary to the traditions of Riversmouth, and he was at all times anxious to avoid giving needless offence to his aged patron. Occasionally, however, he broke through this rule, and he had done so now.

Lady Halcot was in her pew, as she seldom failed to be, despite her increasing infirmities. She counted it her duty to set a good example; and though unwell for some days past she was there.

Charity sermons are not, as a rule, peculiarly spirit-stirring addresses; but this charity sermon promised early to be somewhat exceptional in its

nature. The preacher was a middle-aged man, of a rugged and fervid aspect, yet a gentleman. He said little about the immediate object for which help was needed, taking at once a broader stand. Also he kept away from the smooth and sleepy lines of much pulpit phraseology, and spoke in terse every-day language, such as he might have used in conversation, always to the point, nevertheless always reverent. Such clothing of ideas in words might almost take the place of eloquence. Mr. Rossiter, with all his earnestness, had not yet learned this secret of speaking straight to men's hearts in strong Saxon English; and he began to take a lesson for himself, as he sat watching his congregation wake up from its ordinary air of drowsy submission.

"Twelfth chapter of St. Luke; twentieth and twenty-first verses. 'But God said unto him, *Thou* fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So *is* he that layeth up treasure for himself, and *is not rich toward God*.'"

The closing words rang solemnly through the church. The clergyman, indulging in no circumlocutions, with the half-closed Bible clasped in his hands, went straight to the point.

"Which among you all, my friends, can count himself thus 'rich toward God?'

"You are strangers to me, and I am a stranger

to you. Of your families, your homes, your circumstances, I know nothing. But this much I know, that not one among you is without his treasure laid up, whether for himself or for his God.

"Wealth is a matter which men see differently from different stand-points. A man may be rich in his own or others' estimation, with five hundred a year. A man may be poor, at least in his own estimation, with ten thousand a year. The exact 'how much' that each one has is not the question. You have your wealth, more or less; you have your possessions, great or small; you have your treasures that you have provided; you have these things in some sort, every one of you. Now comes the vital question. Is it only treasure for self, mere pelf of earthly storehouses, subject to mildew, moth and flame? One night or day thy soul shall be required of thee; then, whose shall that poor worthless rubbish be, which thou hast so carefully provided? Not thine, in any case.

"Not rich toward God. There is the gist of the matter. You may have your 'much goods laid up for many years.' You may have your thousands or tens of thousands, descending to you from your forefathers. You may have your luxurious home, your high position, your care and comfort and delicate fare, fruits of industry in generations past. Or you may have

striven and fought your own way upwards from poverty to comparative wealth, till now you can sit with your hands before you, and look placidly round, confident in the knowledge that want and poverty cannot touch you. Of course that 'cannot' is far from absolute. Riches do 'take to themselves wings' unexpectedly sometimes. You know this, yet you feel secure. You have your possessions inherited by descent or gained through labor of hand or brain, and you know you are comfortably provided for, till—till—

"My friends, till when?"

The question came sharply, breaking into the slowly uttered syllables which preceded it. He paused for an instant, and the silence was intense. Lady Halcot looked stern and pale. She thought the preacher meant herself. Mr. Widrington, seated opposite, felt equally sure that he was the person intended.

"'This night:' the summons came thus. It may be 'this night' to any one of us. Suppose the call came now to you, whose should those things be which you have provided—those things which have filled your hearts and lives hitherto? Have you treasure laid up in the heavens?"

"'Surely every man walketh in a vain show: . . . he heapeth up *riches*, and knoweth not who shall gather them.' You may make your plans and form your wills, and those plans and wills

may or may not be carried out, after you are gone. What if they are? You will not be here to see it. What of yourself, stripped of all your wealth, of all your position, of all that you have sought and valued and stored and laid up,—yourself, standing a cold and poverty-stricken soul, before the Eternal God? Not rich toward God, in the hour of death. It is an awful thought. ‘Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength, but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his *substance*.’ So in the margin.

“I do not for a moment say that wealth is a sin. No gift of God can in itself be evil. I say only that wealth is a danger. Poverty is a danger, too, though of a different kind. No condition of life is without its dangers. If you hold your treasures of any kind as from God, they will not harm you.

“‘How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God.’ Yes, because ‘they trust in the abundance of their riches!’ That is why! God made Abraham abundantly rich, and Abraham was none the worse in heart and spirit; for his trust was in God, not in his wealth. So, too, with Job. When his riches were swept away, he could still say of God, ‘Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.’ Which of you could speak those words from the

bottom of the heart, if your best treasures were taken away? And mark,—treasure does not always mean money. There may be treasures in the shape of mental powers; treasures in the shape of loved friends, or relations; as well as treasures in the shape of wealth. Those who have not one have another of these.

“‘The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it.’ My friends, do not make it needful that he should add sorrow. Take heed that your hearts are rich toward God, with the wealth which Christ alone can give; and neither riches nor poverty will hurt you then.

“Remember, every one of you, treasure-holders of any kind or degree, that which you have is not your own. It is the Lord’s. You have to use it for your God; and by-and-by he will demand from you a solemn account of the use which you have made of it. Are you prepared to yield this account?

“The need for which I plead to-day is one among many needs. I do not seek merely to move your pity, or to stir your feelings, in the hope of loosening your purse-strings. The principle of the matter lies far deeper than any surface stir of pitiful feeling. God has given to each one of us so much of the good things of this world. Are we heaping them together for ourselves, or are we using them for God, counting

them as lent, while the true God-given riches of forgiveness and peace and joy are in our hearts for evermore?

“Using them for God means more than an occasional shilling put into the plate at church, or an occasional penny tossed to a beggar. It means more than plans of kindness, and schemes of generosity. It means doing what you do for Christ’s sake. It means doing what you do as unto the Lord himself.

“There is a deadly sin spoken of in the Bible. Listen—

“‘The wicked shall be turned into hell, *and* all the nations that FORGET GOD.’

“And again,—‘The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek *after* God: God *is* not in all his thoughts.’ Only forgetfulness again! How much has God been in our thoughts this past week? Put the question to yourselves. Consider this, ye that FORGET GOD.

“Only forgetfulness! A small matter in the eyes of many. It will not seem a small matter, in that hour when you stand face to face with the Eternal God, whom you through long years of life have habitually forgotten.

“Forgotten him in your work! Forgotten him in your duties! Forgotten him in your pleasures! Forgotten him in your money-earning! Forgotten him in your money-spending!

“And yet—he is your Father. He has not forgotten your needs. The Lord Jesus did not forget to die for you. The Holy Spirit does not forget to plead with you.”

So far the sermon proceeded, the effect of the preacher's brief, clear utterances being enhanced by his impressive earnestness and by a mellow voice of strong feeling.

Suddenly, and without the slightest warning as regarded the greater number present, there was a heavy “thud.” Lady Halcot lay senseless upon the floor of the large square pew.

Two or three friends near said afterwards, that they had observed a livid whiteness creeping over the old lady's face, but had not thought much of it. Miss Withers, the only sleepy person in the congregation, had noticed nothing; and Gwendoline, absorbed in attention to the preacher, had been equally oblivious. The collapse of Lady Halcot's powers was so instantaneous that neither could be in time to break the force of the fall, but Gwendoline was the first to lift her head.

A general stir took place, and the thread of close attention was broken. The clergyman came to a sudden pause, and people around craned their necks to observe, with eager whispers: two or three young ladies becoming

slightly hysterical. Help was at hand, and before many seconds had elapsed the little bent figure was carried into the vestry. There, with the help of fresh air and remedies, Lady Halcot slowly revived.

"It must have been the heat of the church. I never fainted in my life before," she said uneasily. "So very strange. If I had guessed that anything of the kind was coming on, I should have walked out. It must have made quite a disturbance. Thanks,—I do not require the salts, Miss Withers. I am quite well." But when she stood up to walk to her carriage, Lady Halcot fell back again in semi-unconsciousness.

The disturbance in church had not been slight, and many found it difficult to give further attention to the sermon. With some, however, the event had rather deepened the effect of the preacher's words, and among these was Mr. Widrington. For so chatty a man he was strangely silent during the remainder of the day; and a clue to his silence came at night.

"Wife," he said tremblingly,—*"I can't get out of my head the things I heard this morning. It's an awful thought that all these years I've been forgetting God,—forgetting him in my getting and my spending too. I didn't mean to, but I have. It was awful to see the old lady go*

down like that, and to think it was, maybe, the call come all of a sudden. I hope it isn't, but there's no knowing; and I hope if it is, she's got her treasure in heaven, all right. But I'm sure I haven't. It's time we should see to it, wife."

The preacher came and went, and his first sermon in Riversmouth was also his last there. But the words flung broadcast upon the soil that day sprang up and grew and bore fruit; not only in the heart of little old Mr. Widrington.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LONELINESS.

SIX weeks had passed since Lady Halcot was first taken ill in church, and she was ill yet. She had not left her room, had scarcely quitted her bed, since that day. Mr. Fosbrook found it difficult to say in precise terms what was the matter with her. She seemed to have no definite ailment, beyond complete collapse of all her powers. She had sunk suddenly into the ways of a confirmed invalid.

Miss Withers from the first moment stepped quietly into the position of head nurse and of general manager in all that appertained to Lady Halcot. That position she retained.

Gwendoline, on the contrary, found herself gradually excluded from the sick-room. A brief visit, once or twice a day, was permitted for a while; but as time went on difficulties were raised, and slowly, almost imperceptibly to herself, it came about that her entrance was forbidden. She had no means of knowing whether this was by Lady Halcot's desire. Miss Withers

did everything in Lady Halcot's name, spoke much of the necessity of keeping her quiet, and smoothly promised to call Gwendoline at once if the old lady seemed to require her.

Gwendoline could not separate the true from the false in these utterances. Had she felt the least security that her presence was desired by Lady Halcot, she would have taken a firm stand immediately. But this security she could not feel. Lady Halcot's long-continued coldness, and the absence now of any kind message from the sick-room, made her shrink from intruding where, as it seemed, she was not wanted.

Life dragged on wearily with her through those weeks. She had no friends, no companions. Miss Withers was with Lady Halcot, morning, noon and night, scarcely ever quitting the room for even a hurried meal, but "snatching food" as she called it, when she could; and never walking out at all. Yet she never appeared over-taxed, but always looked placidly neat and satisfied. Gwendoline wondered at her.

Gwendoline did not know what Mr. Fosbrook thought of the old lady. She would have spoken to him, but no opportunity presented itself. So sure as Mr. Fosbrook's carriage reached the front door, the ubiquitous Miss Withers was gliding through the hall to welcome him, and when he

left she accompanied him out upon the steps, talking always in muffled and confidential tones. To Gwendoline her report was invariably the same. "Mr. Fosbrook considered Lady Halcot very feeble still, and desired that she should be kept perfectly quiet."

It was a strange life for Gwendoline, brought up as she had been in a crowd, now to be cut off entirely from all whom she loved. She could hardly in any circumstances have felt herself more completely isolated. Letters were her great comfort, and correspondence was no longer subject to supervision; but Gwendoline was strictly honorable, and she would in no case exceed the bounds marked out for her by Lady Halcot. A feeling of lonely restlessness made it very difficult to settle to any course of study; and rides and drives were melancholy, with no particular object in them, no companion with whom to exchange ideas, nobody to see her off or to welcome her home. Gwendoline had not known till now how much of real affection she had learned to bestow upon Lady Halcot, or how keenly the little old lady could be missed out of her daily life.

In despair of other interests she took to her painting again, and spent hours over it daily, struggling with lassitude and disinclination, and trying to revive a shadow of her former delight

in her pencil. Some of the pleasure crept back slowly, but she missed the old companionship over it, the criticisms, opinions and judgments of fellow-students, together with the warm home-interest in all that she undertook. The poor girl sometimes flung her pencil down, and sobbed aloud in her heart-ache. Occasionally Miss Withers would appear for an instant, and call her efforts "so pretty." Gwendoline had difficulty then in controlling herself to receive politely the unwelcome commendation.

She was alone in Lady Halcot's boudoir early one afternoon, going through an hour's self-prescribed reading, when to her surprise Mr. Fosbrook walked in. It was half-an-hour before his usual time of calling, and Gwendoline said, as she rose, "I did not hear the carriage."

"No, I came on my own feet for once," said Mr. Fosbrook, "and finding the front door on the latch I did not ring. Have you been out to-day, Miss Halcombe?"

"No; I did not feel inclined."

"Don't give way to that feeling."

Gwendoline smiled assent, cheered quickly by the interest shown in herself.

"You are not looking very well, I think. People cannot get on without fresh air."

"No; I will remember," she said, not wishing to waste valuable time. "Mr. Fosbrook, what

do you really think of Lady Halcot? Will she soon be well?"

Mr. Fosbrook looked at her in silence for two seconds. Then he said gravely, "Miss Withers undertook to tell you."

"She tells me nothing," said Gwendoline hastily. "Except that Lady Halcot is weak and must be kept quiet."

"That is true—so far. It is not all. There has been a marked failure the last three days."

"A failure of strength?"

"Of vital power."

"I have heard nothing," Gwendoline said in a trembling voice; "nothing whatever. Is this right? Why am I to be kept away from Lady Halcot, and to have the truth hidden from me?"

"Then it is not by your own wish?"

"Staying out of the room! No, indeed! Could you think so?" asked Gwendoline reproachfully.

"Miss Withers seemed to think you were of a nervous disposition as regarded illness."

Gwendoline exclaimed in amazement.

"I confess, it did not sound very much like the young lady whom I saw leaping from the rock," he said, with a half smile. "But characters are often inconsistent in their developments."

"If I thought Lady Halcot wished to see me, nothing should keep me out of her room," said Gwendoline indignantly. "Miss Withers! As if she had any right whatever!"

"It is possible that Lady Halcot wishes it more than she allows to appear."

"Has she ever said anything—ever asked you about me?"

"No," Mr. Fosbrook said at once. "Your name has not been mentioned by her in my hearing. I confess the silence has struck me as unnatural."

Gwendoline stood with a look of painful perplexity on her face.

"If I only knew what to do!" she said. "Did you mean just now that you think Lady Halcot's state at all serious?—anything to be anxious about?"

"It would be no kindness to hide the truth from you," said Mr. Fosbrook gravely. "She will never come down-stairs again, Miss Halcombe."

"You don't mean to say that she is dying?"

Gwendoline's startled white face was turned upon him in blank distress. But his answer left her in no doubt.

"Lady Halcot is dying."

"Not actually dying—not so bad as that! How long can she live?"

"It may be weeks. It may be only days."

"And she—does she know it?"

"I cannot tell. She does not appear to be aware."

The door opened slowly, and Miss Withers entered, a rather disagreeable expression underlying her smile. "Mr. Fosbrook already," she said. "You are early to-day."

Mr. Fosbrook was of course entirely indifferent to Miss Withers' pleasure or displeasure, and he shook hands with his usual manner, contented to have achieved a step which might prevent after unhappiness or self-reproaches on the part of Gwendoline. He had suspected some not quite straightforward dealing. Having done his part, he left Gwendoline to carry on the matter.

CHAPTER XIX.

TO A POINT.

G WENDOLINE'S resolution was quickly taken. A plan of action flashed into her mind, and she unhesitatingly resolved to follow it out. With all her capabilities of passive endurance, there was much of force and spirit underlying them, and she was now thoroughly aroused. No thought of self came into the question. Her solicitude was all for Lady Halcot.

"Will you please to come up-stairs?" Miss Withers said, with somewhat less than her usual placid confidence.

Gwendoline came forward a step, colorless still, but thoroughly self-possessed.

"Miss Withers, I have been asking Mr. Fosbrook his real opinion of Lady Halcot, and I find matters to be very much worse than you have given me reason to suppose."

Miss Withers murmured something about "not liking to distress Miss Halcombe."

"Mr. Fosbrook has also given me leave to go

in and out of the sick-room," continued Gwendoline calmly.

"Lady Halcot's wishes—" came in answer to this.

"I will find out for myself what Lady Halcot's wishes really are," said Gwendoline. "Mr. Fosbrook, would you please come up-stairs with me? If you like to make a third, Miss Withers, pray come also."

Miss Withers seemingly did like to make a third, for she followed Mr. Fosbrook, while Gwendoline preceded him. The little fair-haired woman's control of feature was curiously displayed at this moment. Neither fear nor annoyance showed in her face.

At the bed-room door Gwendoline paused. "I do not wish to startle Lady Halcot," she said in an undertone. "No, not you, Miss Withers. Mr. Fosbrook—"

Strange to say Miss Withers obeyed, drawing back with a still unruffled mien. The doctor went in alone, greeting his invalid cheerfully. "How are you to-day, Lady Halcot? Not very bright, I am afraid! No—I thought so. Do you think it would do you harm to see somebody else by way of variety? Miss Halcombe is anxious to pay you a visit."

Lady Halcot was on the wide sofa, in a nest of cushions and shawls, not dressed, but muffled

up warmly, her shrunken, wan face looking out from manifold wraps. Excessive restlessness had driven her for an hour from her bed, but she had had to be lifted like a child, and summer heat brought no warmth to her chilled frame.

"Gwendoline!" she said in a thin, low voice. "Yes, bring her in."

An instant's hesitation on Gwendoline's part and the old lady would have withdrawn into her shell of icy reserve. Gwendoline did not hesitate. She came quietly in, answering the doctor's summons, knelt down beside the couch, and pressed her lips to one of the small, withered hands.

"Gwendoline—my dear."

Lady Halcot was very much upset. Her voice shook painfully, and a tearless sob broke into the words.

"You will let me be with you now, will you not?" asked Gwendoline beseechingly. "Mr. Fosbrook says that I may. I have been so longing to see you all these weeks."

"She told me—you—"

Lady Halcot broke off, and her apprehensive glance round the room was not lost upon her companions. Miss Withers had become invisible. Mr. Fosbrook went to the door and closed it, not quite unconscious of a figure moving away on the other side.



"But you will not leave me again, my dear."

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"There has been some misunderstanding," he said, as he came back. "Miss Halcombe has not remained away by her own will."

"Ah, yes,—a misunderstanding," murmured Lady Halcot. "Only a misunderstanding. But you will not leave me again, my dear. I have wanted you so much. And I thought you were too busy to care to come—riding out and painting. A little misunderstanding."

Gwendoline had it on her lips to say,—*"She told me you did not want me."* But something seemed to restrain the utterance. The old lady looked so broken and shadowy, that Gwendoline shrank from putting her to pain.

"I am not well to-day," Lady Halcot said, as the doctor felt her pulse. "I am very weak."

"Yes, very," he answered. "Is there anything you could fancy in the way of food to-day—anything fresh?"

"Ah, if only one did not need to eat! I have such a distaste for everything. But perhaps—perhaps with Gwendoline to sit by me—"

"I am going to be your nurse now," said Gwendoline softly.

"I should like that, my dear. And I think, perhaps—a little nearer, Gwendoline; I don't want to be overheard. I think—if you could arrange it—when you are not here—if Spurrell or Frith could take your place, so as not to leave

me quite alone with Miss Withers—" the tones were eager as well as tremulous. "I have not strength to insist—and indeed Miss Withers is a most excellent nurse—I have no complaints to make. But still—"

"You shall never be without Spurrell or Frith or me in the room, for a single instant," said Gwendoline firmly.

"Don't tell Miss Withers that I wish it. I should be sorry to pain her, and indeed she means everything for the best—but if you could arrange it—"

The mastery which Miss Withers had evidently obtained over the old lady in her weakness was strangely and pitifully shown. Gwendoline could hardly control her indignation, yet she only replied quietly—"I will indeed."

"Then that will be all I could wish. Doctor, I think I will ask you to come again this evening. The sinking is worst then, and perhaps you could do something to relieve it. I want a few words with Gwendoline now, before I am too tired. I don't want you to find fault with Miss Withers, for she meant everything for the best—but if you could just keep her a few minutes in conversation down-stairs—"

The doctor said "Certainly," and took leave at once, fully comprehending. Gwendoline went outside the door with him, and said under her

breath—"Would it not be possible to forbid Miss Withers the room?"

"I hardly think so," he answered, equally low. "Lady Halcot could not stand the agitation. Do as she has asked you—and meantime I will give Miss Withers a word of warning. It is probably only a question of a few days."

Gwendoline went back to her old position, holding again the withered hand between her own, and wondering sadly what might be the import of those words to the old lady herself. Only a few days! What lay beyond?

"That is what I wished," the sunken voice said. "Is the door shut, Gwendoline? I have something to say, and I do not wish to be overheard. My memory seems so weak now—but I think I can remember what it was."

"It will come back to you by-and-by. Don't distress yourself with trying to recall it," Gwendoline said tenderly, as she might have spoken to a sick child. This poor little wasted feeble creature seemed utterly unlike the dignified Lady Halcot. "Another time will do as well."

"No, my dear. I cannot tell. The doctor does not say what is the matter with me, and I suppose it is only old age and tiredness—but I shall never be well again. And sometimes everything seems going from me."

She looked steadily into vacancy, with a

strained expression, as if seeking after wandering ideas.

"Something that you did—what was it, Gwendoline? Did you give me reason to be displeased with you, or was it—was it your mother? I have so much confusion, I cannot disentangle matters."

"Mother displeased you long ago, Lady Halcot, but you have forgiven her now, have you not?" asked Gwendoline gently. "And you were displeased with me, but I could not tell why. I think it may have been another misunderstanding—through Miss Withers."

"Yes—yes—I dare say it was that," said Lady Halcot feebly. "We need not go into the question now. You are a good girl, Gwendoline. I wish—I wish I had not been persuaded to alter my will."

Gwendoline heard this silently.

"I don't think I can alter it again. I am so tired—so very weak and weary," continued Lady Halcot, after a pause. "And I am not quite sure that it would be right. The money left for a hospital and almshouses—I don't think it would quite be right to take that back—now."

"No, I am sure it would not," said Gwendoline.

"You feel so too. That is a relief to my mind," said Lady Halcot, as if surprised. "I

thought perhaps you would be angry. But you do not love riches as some do."

"I think I would rather not be very rich," said Gwendoline. "Riches bring danger with them."

"Ah—that sermon!" and a shiver passed over her. "Yes, I remember. It comes back to me often. But, my dear, you will have something—only I cannot recall how much. And I have left four thousand pounds to Miss Withers. It is a large sum. I think she has wanted me lately to make it eight thousand, but I could not feel that to be right. Still she has worked hard for me, and she means so well always—and there are her nieces and nephew too. You will not grudge it to her, Gwendoline? I am too weak and tired to alter anything further."

"It will be all quite right," said Gwendoline softly. "Don't trouble yourself any more about such things."

"I have nearly done with them. But there is the responsibility—" said Lady Halcot. Then more faintly she added—"I must rest now."

Sleep crept over her, and she lay with her head supported on Gwendoline's arm. Miss Withers presently came in, wearing precisely her usual air and expression. Gwendoline could not have told from her face whether or no she realized the changed aspect of affairs. Presently,

however, a movement of Lady Halcot released her arm, and Miss Withers then made signs of a desire to speak. The two moved noiselessly into the adjoining room.

"I merely wished, Miss Halcombe, to apologize for my unfortunate mistake. It must seem strange to you now, but I assure you Lady Halcot has never expressed the slightest desire for your presence."

"It does seem strange," said Gwendoline quietly.

"If I had understood—if I had guessed—but at least you will give me credit for good motives."

Gwendoline thought it best not to enter upon a discussion of motives. "Lady Halcot wishes to look upon the whole as a misunderstanding," she said; "and I am willing to accept the same view of the matter. I can say no more, except that for your own sake I am very sorry for the way in which you have acted."

Miss Withers showed no resentment. "I can quite believe that my conduct may appear singular to you," she said meekly. "But on reflection I believe you will view it differently."

Gwendoline was silent, fearing to speak too strongly. She found patient hearing not easy.

"Of course, if it is Lady Halcot's wish that I should leave Riversmouth—" Miss Withers suggested, with a mournful intonation.

"No," Gwendoline answered. "Lady Halcot takes the most indulgent view possible of your conduct, and I am trying to do the same. Mr. Fosbrook forbids agitation for her, and there must be no explanations. We can make use of you in the sick-room still; only you must please to understand that arrangements are entirely in my hands."

"To be sure—undoubtedly, Miss Halcombe. I shall not forget," said Miss Withers.

CHAPTER XX.

THE END.

NOR did she. During many weeks following, the little slim lady neatly accommodated herself to her new position, appealed to Gwendoline on all occasions, came and went as she was bid, did as she was told, and seemed quite as well content to be second as to be first. Truly she showed single-hearted devotion, though to no worthy aim. If the four thousand pounds might not be doubled, Miss Withers was at least determined to give no loophole of a further reason for the legacy being halved or altogether done away.

The motive was a powerful one with Miss Withers, and it acted powerfully on her conduct, as such baser motives not seldom do. A more submissive and unobtrusive yet useful attendant could hardly have been found. Gwendoline in her inexperience found Miss Withers a valuable assistant. If Miss Withers felt resentment towards Gwendoline, it was completely veiled. A

stranger would have counted her affectionate to the older and the younger lady alike.

Had Lady Halcot passed away, as the doctor with good reason expected, in the course of the next few days, Miss Withers would have gained the object for which she had so patiently striven.

But there came an unlooked-for rally; not recovery, only a slow return to something more of life and warmth. The sinking chills and exhaustion lessened, and Lady Halcot became able to take an interest in things about her once more.

There was no talk of dressing or of leaving her room, for she was far too feeble for any such exertions, yet there seemed to be an indefinite postponement of the end of her illness, once apparently so near. Mr. Fosbrook ascribed something of the rally to the old lady's pleasure in having Gwendoline with her again.

Days grew into weeks, weeks lengthened into months, and still she lingered on, sometimes better and sometimes worse. Illness had strangely broken the formerly stern and high spirit. Lady Halcot had become gently affectionate, patient under suffering, grateful for every attention. Could illness alone have worked such a change?

She was still, as ever, exceedingly reserved on religious topics. Gwendoline wondered often what might be going on below the surface, but

she dared not attempt to penetrate the proof-armor. The day after her return to the sick-room Lady Halcot had said, with a touch of nervous shyness, "If it will not fatigue you, Gwendoline, I should wish you to read me the Lessons every morning, as my eyes are now so weak." Gwendoline had thankfully complied, throwing much earnest feeling into her low-voiced utterance of the sacred words. But no conversation had as yet become possible.

Towards the close of summer there was again a seeming advance, more marked than any preceding, and for several days Lady Halcot was able to dress partially, and to be wheeled into an adjoining room. Gwendoline spoke of recovery in a hopeful tone, and Lady Halcot moved her head negatively. "No, my dear, it is only for a little while. But I feel stronger just now, and I am glad of it. There are one or two things to be done."

"Not things tiring to you, I hope," said Gwendoline.

"One must be tired sometimes," Lady Halcot said calmly. "My plan in life has always been to do what had to be done, and to let bodily consequences take care of themselves. But of late I have been unable to act,—there has been such a lack of mental energy. I am more like myself this week. Gwendoline, I

wish you to write to Mr. Selwyn this morning, and request him to come to me quickly,—to-morrow, if possible. Express yourself in urgent terms. I cannot tell how long my strength will last. I also wish you to post the letter yourself, and to say nothing to Miss Withers."

Gwendoline obeyed in all particulars, and Mr. Selwyn's appearance at the Leys next morning was entirely unexpected, so far as Miss Withers was concerned. She scrutinized the faces of all around, sharply and uneasily, but no opportunity was afforded her to put questions. Mr. Selwyn had a tête-à-tête talk with the old lady, and returned to London immediately; but a few days later he appeared again, and was a second time closeted with Lady Halcot. Moreover, the clergyman, Mr. Rossiter, who had of late been quietly readmitted at the Leys, and had become a frequent caller on Lady Halcot, was present during part of the latter interview, evidently by previous arrangement. Miss Withers inquired, this time suspiciously, of Gwendoline,—“What has Mr. Selwyn come for?” Gwendoline was glad to be able to reply,—“I do not know, Miss Withers. Lady Halcot has told me nothing.” Possibly the truthful utterance was not quite believed; for double people are apt to suspect others of doubleness.

Next day was Sunday. Lady Halcot's brief

improvement in health seemed to be rapidly on the wane. Early in the morning a change for the worse became apparent, and Mr. Fosbrook, called in hurriedly, did not think well of her state. "I have expected this for some time," he said gravely to Gwendoline. It had been arranged that Mr. Rossiter should come in after breakfast to administer the Holy Communion, as he had done occasionally since she was entirely cut off from attending public worship. Lady Halcot would allow no change, but by the time the short service was at an end she was almost pulseless with exhaustion.

About five o'clock in the afternoon she revived somewhat, and seemed to enjoy a cup of tea. Gwendoline, who had not left her all day, was keeping watch beside the couch, Frith being within call.

"It is passing off now," Lady Halcot said. "I thought this morning that the end was near."

"Oh, not yet," Gwendoline broke out sorrowfully. "Don't talk about leaving me yet."

Lady Halcot's withered hand came softly on hers.

"Will you be a little grieved to lose me, Gwendoline?"

"A little!" Gwendoline's voice choked.

"Yes; you will feel it, I know. You have been very good to me, Gwendoline. But you

will have your mother and all of them again. I am afraid the separation has been hard upon you. If I were living the last two years over again, I would arrange differently. Things that are done cannot be undone, when the time is past."

"We owe so very much to you," murmured Gwendoline.

"Not more than is right. I am thankful to have been able to make these last arrangements—just in time. Now my mind is at rest. I believe your wish would be, Gwendoline, that your mother should be remembered in my will, rather than yourself. I have acted on that supposition; and it will all revert to you later."

"Oh, thank you! I would so much rather—" Gwendoline said earnestly.

"I felt convinced that it would be so. Also I wished that others should see your mother reinstated in her old position, so far as can be now. I do not feel that I can undo the gifts for the building of the hospital and the almshouses. I may be mistaken, but it does not appear to me right. Nor is it necessary. Mr. Selwyn finds the sum total at my disposal to be more than he imagined. Also I have esteemed it my duty to lessen the legacy to Miss Withers. My opinion of her has undergone a change of late. Still I do not wish to show vexation. It has been too much my way in the past. I wish to forgive at

once any manner of wrong-doing towards me. Miss Withers will not find herself entirely forgotten in my remembrances to friends."

Gwendoline was conscious of a slight stir behind the large screen which stood between bed and door. She went to close the latter, and saw a figure passing swiftly down the passage. Gwendoline drew her own conclusions, yet she said nothing.

"Yes; you are right to shut the door. I am very cold to-day. We were speaking about your mother. I wish her to understand that I feel towards her as of old. All bitterness is at an end. Sometimes in the last week, I have thought whether to send for her—"

"If I only might," said Gwendoline.

"I think not. I do not feel as if I could stand it. I am too weak. Give her my love, and tell her I regard her again as my dear niece Eleanor. I wish to keep my mind clear for other matters."

Gwendoline hardly knew whether she might say more. She ventured after a pause to suggest, "Mother is such a comfort in illness."

"Yes, my dear. But it would be agitating,—would recall much that grieves me. I have but one need now, Gwendoline. I want only—Christ."

Lady Halcot seemed striving to break through

the chains of her life-long reserve. She continued with a manifest effort,—

“I think those lonely weeks were good for me. Strangely so. I never knew the feeling of loneliness before, but it came then, when I believed you did not care to come near me, and when all my old confidence was gone. The words of that sermon returned to me, and showed me what I was. And I used to think you could perhaps have helped me. But it was better so. For God himself helped me.”

Another pause followed. Gwendoline asked gently,—“Was it that sermon that made you ill?”

“No; the illness was coming on before. I had felt the signs of it without recognizing them. But the words of the sermon stayed by me afterwards, and I could not put them away.”

Gwendoline’s face begged for more; she could not ask it in words.

“Some of those weeks were terribly hopeless,” Lady Halcot said, in a weary voice, as if strength were failing. “But I am glad of them now, for I think they taught me much, and God has been teaching me ever since. Mr. Rossiter’s visits have been a help, and your reading too. I cannot talk much on such matters, and I hope I do not deceive myself. Sometimes Christ seems so very near—so very loving. How can I help

trusting him? After all these years of forgetfulness,—so much more than I deserve. But I think I am too weak for doctrines and doubts—and perhaps it is better for me. I can only just give myself into his keeping like a child.”

The closing sentence was scarcely audible, and before Gwendoline could make any response, she added faintly—“I have wished to say so much—to be your comfort. I am very tired now. Will you kiss me, my dear Gwendoline? And if—if you would like to send for your mother—yes—send—send—”

Those were almost the last words of Lady Halcot. She fell immediately into a state of unconsciousness, bordering on coma. The doctor was sent for; but he found her beyond reach of remedies. Mrs. Halcombe was telegraphed for; but Gwendoline knew she could not come in time.

Once only Lady Halcot partially awoke. A little before midnight Gwendoline tried to give her some medicine, and it was refused. “O do, please,” she said pleadingly. “Do, dear Lady Halcot. Mother will be here soon.” But Lady Halcot clasped slowly her faded hands, and murmured—“No, no—none but Christ—none but Christ now!”—and within an hour she passed away.

Gwendoline, numb and bewildered, could not shed tears then; neither could she sleep. By six o'clock she was up and dressed, unable any longer to lie still in her restlessness. How soon could "mother" come? The aching of her heart took refuge in this cry.

Mrs. Halcombe had responded to the telegram with the least possible delay. So early as half-past seven a sound of wheels on the carriage-drive became audible. Gwendoline listened intently, and was aware of the front door being opened. She sped quickly down-stairs, and with a muffled cry of "Mother!" was in Mrs. Halcombe's arms.

"Hush, hush, my darling—hush!" Mrs. Halcombe said tenderly, for Gwendoline was clinging to her in a paroxysm of sobs, which yet were by no means all sorrow. The joy of re-union had at least an equal share in her feelings. She was overstrained, however, by long watching and nursing, and nervous excitement was not to be at once kept under; and the very relief of finding herself once more a child under a parent's care, made self-command for a while the more difficult. "O mother, it has been long, so sad," she said, in her tears of pain and happiness. "I love Lady Halcot dearly now, and I do miss her—but oh, mother, I have not known how to get on without you, and it is such rest to have you again!"

That sense of rest grew upon her through the days following, days necessarily mournful in many respects. There was much to tell and much to hear on both sides. Mrs. Halcombe quietly took matters into her own hands, sparing her child in every way; and Gwendoline was temporarily unwell enough, from all she had gone through, to need being spared. Miss Withers shunned them both, and looked unhappy.

The funeral was conducted with heavy solemn grandeur, according to Riversmouth traditions. Then followed the reading of the will; a singular will, with its weighty addenda in the shape of long codicils undoing previous arrangements.

The Riversmouth estate, together with the title, descended to a nephew present on the occasion. Most of the subsequent alterations were in respect of Lady Halcot's disposable property, inherited from her mother.

The large sums lately set aside for hospital and almshouses remained untouched; as also did legacies to the amount of nearly twenty thousand pounds, left to various friends. In place of four thousand pounds to Miss Withers, five hundred pounds were left to her, and five hundred to each of her two nieces and to Conrad. Mrs. Halcombe found herself the possessor of thirteen thousand pounds, in addition to the five

hundred yearly already settled upon her—both being held in trust for Gwendoline until after her own and her husband's death; while to Gwendoline was left the bulk of Lady Halcot's personal possessions, jewels, plate, books, pictures, and many valuable knick-knacks. "O mother, how good she has been to us! I am so glad it is not more," Gwendoline said, with a sigh. But one pale-faced disappointed woman could not have echoed these words.

Miss Withers from that time dropped out of Gwendoline's life. She went to reside elsewhere, bitter in spirit at her failure; and Lady Halcot's legacies sowed dissension between herself and her nieces.

Gwendoline returned to be a child once more in her old home; though only to be there a little while, for a better and roomier home was speedily found, outside the noise and stir of London, and within reach of green fields. Gwendoline was more than ever the darling of all around her—and not least of Honora Dewhurst, still at her old work. Some said Gwendoline was much changed, and by no means for the worse. It might have been so; for discipline seldom fails to leave its mark, one way or the other.

Months passed, and another change loomed in sight. Mrs. Halcombe was the first to see it

coming, the first to read the meaning of Mortimer Selwyn's growing intimacy with her home circle. He did not bring matters hastily to a point; but when at length he spoke, it was with the full concurrence of Mr. and Mrs. Halcombe, and with his own father's hearty approval. Gwendoline found no difficulty in giving him an answer.

About a year after Lady Halcot's death Gwendoline Halcombe became Mrs. Mortimer Selwyn. Hers was thenceforward no idle life. Her husband was a man of ample means, and of countless schemes. It was Gwendoline's delight to work hand in hand with him, serving the Master whom they loved.





